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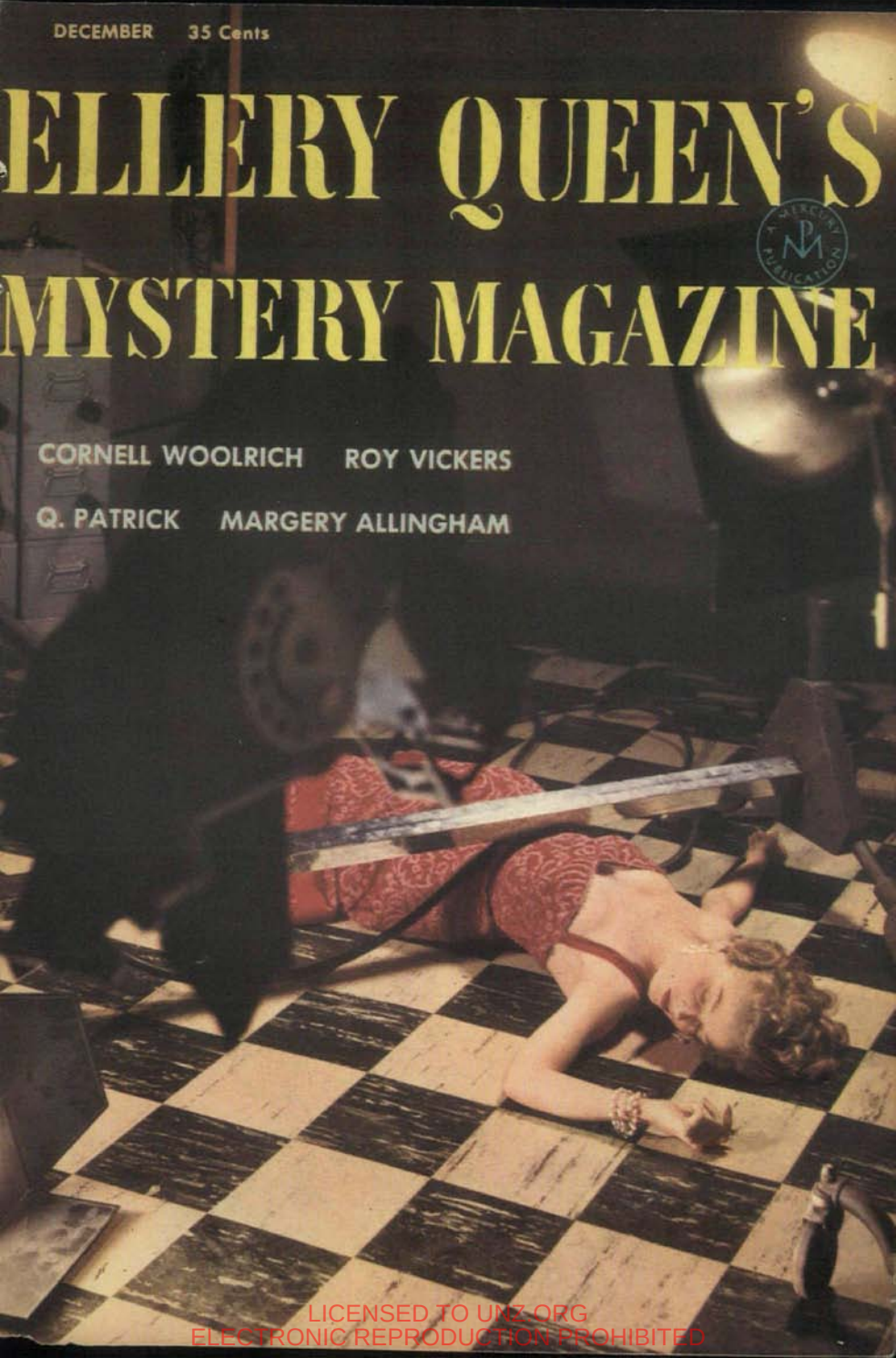

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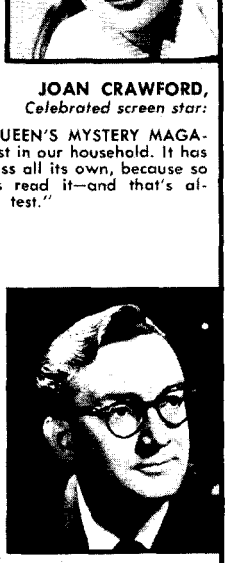

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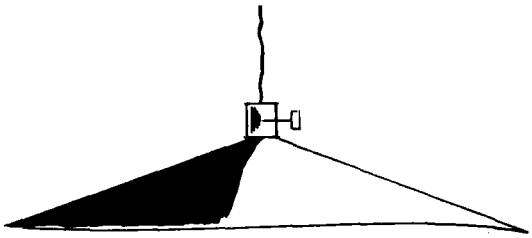

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PUBLISHER: *Joseph W. Ferman* — EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 24, No. 6, Whole No. 133, DECEMBER 1954. Published monthly by Mercury Publications, Inc., at 35¢ a copy. Annual subscription $4.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, Canada and the Pan American Union; $5.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 471 Park Ave., New York 22, N. Y. Entered as second class matter at the post office at Concord, N. H. under the act of March 3, 1879.

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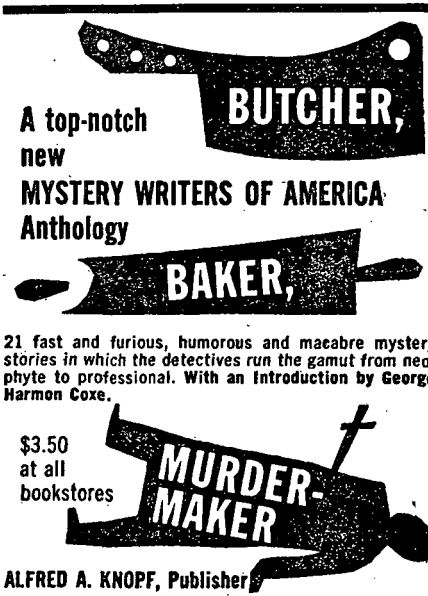
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Exactly four years before Cornell Woolrich wrote the story you are about to read, he prepared a thumbnail sketch of himself for Whit Burnett and Martha Foley, then editors of "Story" magazine. The pen-portrait went: "I have been writing professionally since I was nineteen, a year before I left college. Which is only mentioned to prove that people will rush into print before they have anything to say. Published six books without it being at all necessary. Now, after five years of doing nothing but short pieces, I finally have a novel which is crying to be written, but I find that I cannot afford the luxury of six months or a year without an assured income. Probably haven't the gambler's instinct. My idea is to do it in some quiet place where they don't have taxis or subways; give it a break; let it be born with a gold spoon in its mouth . . ."

We don't know if Cornell Woolrich ever wrote that novel with the "gold spoon in its mouth"; but we do know that he has come a long way since he typed that thumbnail sketch seventeen years ago, and since he wrote "Something That Happened in Our House" — a long, long way . . .

SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED IN OUR HOUSE

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

MISS PRINCE KNEW ALL THE SIGNS that meant homework hadn't been done. The hangdog look, the guiltily lowered head. She stood there by the Gaines boy's desk, one hand extended. "Well, I'm waiting, Johnny."

The culprit squirmed uncomfortably to his feet. "I — I couldn't do it, teacher."

"Why not?"

"I — I didn't know what to write about."

"That's no excuse," Miss Prince said firmly. "I gave the class the simplest kind of theme this time. I said to write about something you know, something that really happened, either at home or elsewhere. If the others were able to, why weren't you?"

"I couldn't think of anything that happened."

Miss Prince turned away. "Well, you'll stay in and sit there until you do. When I give out homework I expect it to be done!" She returned to her desk, stacked the collected

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creative efforts to one side, and took up the day's lesson.

Three o'clock struck and the seats before her emptied like magic in one headlong, scampering rush for the door. All but the second one back on the outside aisle.

"You can begin now, Johnny," said Miss Prince relentlessly. "Take a clean sheet of paper and quit staring out the window."

Although the boy probably wouldn't have believed it, she didn't enjoy this any more than he did. He was keeping her in just as much as she was keeping him in. But discipline had to be maintained.

The would-be author seemed to be suffering from an acute lack of inspiration. He chewed the rubber of his pencil, fidgeted, stared at the blackboard, and nothing happened.

"You're not trying, Johnny!" she said severely, at last.

"I can't think of anything," he lamented.

"Yes, you can. Stop saying that. Write about your dog or cat, if you can't think of anything else."

"I haven't any."

She went back to her papers. He raised his hand finally, to gain her attention. "Is it all right to write about a dream?"

"I suppose so, if that's the best you can do," she acquiesced. It seemed to be the only way out of the predicament. "But I wanted you to write something that really happened. This was to test your powers of observation and description."

"This was part-true and only part a dream," he assured her.

He bent diligently to the desk, to make up for time lost. At the end of fifteen minutes he stood before her with the effort completed. "All right, you can go home now," she consented wearily. "And the next time you come to school without your homework —" But the door had already closed behind him.

She smiled slightly to herself, with a sympathetic understanding he wouldn't have given her credit for, and placed the latest masterpiece on top of the others, to take home with her. As she did so, her eye, glancing idly along the opening sentences, was caught by something. She lingered on, reading, forgetting her original intention of rising from her desk and going out to the cloakroom to get her hat.

The epistle before her, in laborious, straight up-and-down, childish handwriting, read:

Johnny Gaines
English Comp. 2

Something that happened in our house

One night I wasn't sleeping so good on account of something I eat, and I dreamed I was out in a boat and the water was rough and rocking me up and down a lot. So then I woke up and the floor in my room was shaking kind of and so was my bed and everything. And I even heard a table and chair fall down, downstairs. So I got

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kind of scared and I sneaked downstairs to see what was the matter. But by that time it stopped again and everything was qiet.

My mother was in the kitchen straitening things up again, and she didn't want me to come near there when she first saw me. But I looked in anyway. Then she closed the outside door and she told me some kind of a varmint got in the house from outside, and my pa had a hard time getting it and killing it, and that was why everything fell over. It sure must have been a bad kind of one, because it scared her a lot, she was still shaking all the time. She was standing still, but she was all out of breath. I asked her where it was and she said he carried it outside with him to get rid of it far away from the house.

Then I saw where his hat got to when he was having all that trouble catching it, and he never even missed it. It fell through the stove onto the ashis. So she picked it up out of there when I showed her, and the ashis made it look even cleaner than before when he had it on. Almost like new.

Then she got some water and a brush and started to scrub the kitchen floor where she said the varmint got it dirtied up. But I couldn't see where it was because she got in the way. And she wouldn't let me stay and watch, she made me go upstairs again.

So that was all that happened.

When she had finished, Miss Prince turned her head abruptly toward the door, as if to recall the author of the composition.

She sat on there for a while, tapping her pencil thoughtfully against the edge of her teeth.

Miss Prince settled herself uneasily on one of the straight-backed chairs against the wall that the desk-sergeant had indicated to her, and waited, fiddling with her handbag.

She felt out of place in a police station anteroom, and wondered what had made her come like this.

A pair of thick-soled brogues came walloping out, stopped short before her, and she looked up. She'd never been face to face with a professional detective before. This one didn't look like one at all. He looked more like a businessman who had dropped into the police station to report his car stolen, or something.

"Anything I can do for you?" he asked.

"It's — it's just something that I felt I ought to bring to your attention," she faltered. "I'm Emily Prince of the English Department at the Benjamin Harrison Public School." She fumbled for the composition, extended it toward him. "One of my pupils handed this in to me yesterday afternoon."

He read it over, handed it back to her. "I don't get it," he grinned. "You want me to pinch the kid that wrote this for murdering the King's English?"

She flashed him an impatient look. "I think it's obvious that this child

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witnessed an act of violence, a crime of some sort, without realizing its full implication," she said coldly. "You can read between the lines. I believe that a murder has taken place in that house, and gone undiscovered. I think the matter should be investigated."

She stopped short. He had begun to act in a most unaccountable manner. The lower part of his face began to twitch, and a dull-red flush overspread it. "Excuse me a minute," he said in a choked voice, stood up abruptly, and walked away from her. She noticed him holding his hand against the side of his face, as if to shield it from view. He stopped a minute at the other end of the room, stood there with his shoulders shaking, then turned and came back. He coughed a couple of times on the way over.

"If there's anything funny about this, I fail to see it!"

"I'm sorry," he said, sitting down again. "It hit me so sudden, I couldn't help it. A kid writes a composition, the first thing that comes into his head, just so he can get it over with and go out and play, and you come here and ask us to investigate. Aw, now listen, lady —"

She surveyed him with eyes that were not exactly lanterns of esteem. "I cross-questioned the youngster. Today, after class. Before coming here. He insists it was *not* made up — that it's true."

"Naturally he would. The detail — I mean the assignment, was for them to write about something true, wasn't it? He was afraid he'd have to do it over if he admitted it was imaginary."

"Just a minute, Mr. —"

"Kendall," he supplied.

"May I ask what your duties are?"

"I'm a detective attached to the Homicide Squad. That's what you asked for."

It was now her turn to get in a dirty lick. "I just wanted to make sure," she said dryly. "There's been no way of telling since I've been talking to you."

"Ouch!" he murmured.

"There are certain details given here," she went on, flourishing the composition at him, "that are not within the scope of a child's imagination. Here's one: his mother was standing still, but she was all out of breath. Here's another: a hat lying in just such and such a place. Here's the most pertinent of the lot: her scrubbing of the kitchen floor at that hour of the night. It's full of little touches like that. It wouldn't occur to a child to make up things like that. They're *too* realistic. A child's flights of fancy would incline toward more fantastic things. Shadows and spooks and faces at the window. I *deal* in children — I know how their minds work."

"Well," he let her know stubbornly, "I deal in murders. And I don't run out making a fool of myself on the strength of a composition written by a kid in school!"

She stood up so suddenly her chair skittered back into the wall. "Sorry if I've wasted your time. I'll know better in the future!"

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"It's not mine you've wasted," he countered. "It's your own, I'm afraid."

A few minutes after her class had been dismissed the next day, a "monitor," one of the older children used to carry messages about the building, knocked on the door. "There's a man outside would like to talk to you, Miss Prince."

She stepped out into the hall. The man, Detective Kendall of the Homicide Squad, was tossing a piece of chalk up and down in the hollow of his hand.

"Thought you might like to know," he said, "that I stopped that Gaines youngster on his way to school this morning and asked him a few questions. It's just like I told you yesterday. The first words out of his mouth were that he made the whole thing up. He couldn't think of anything, and it was nearly 4 o'clock, so he scribbled down the first thing that came into his head."

If he thought this would force her to capitulate, he was sadly mistaken. "Of course he'd deny it — to *you*. That's about as valid as a confession extracted from an adult by third-degree methods. The mere fact that you stopped to question him about it frightened him into thinking he'd done something wrong. He wasn't sure just what, but he played safe by saying he'd made it up."

He thrust his jaw forward. "You know what I think is the matter with you?" he told her bluntly. "I think you're *looking* for trouble!"

"Thank you for your cooperation, it's been overwhelming!" she said, snatching something from him as she turned away. "And will you kindly refrain from marking the walls with that piece of chalk! Pupils are punished when they do it!"

She returned stormily to the classroom. The Gaines boy sat hunched forlornly, looking very small in the sea of empty seats. "I've found out it wasn't your fault for being late, Johnny," she relented. "You can go now, and I'll make it up to you by letting you out earlier tomorrow."

He scuttled for the door.

"Johnny, just a minute. I'd like to ask you something."

His face clouded as he came back slowly.

"Was that composition of yours true or made up?"

"Made up, Miss Prince," he mumbled, scuffing his feet.

Which only proved to her that he was more afraid of the anonymous man with a badge than of his own teacher.

"Johnny, do you live in a large house?"

"Yes'm, pretty big," he admitted.

"Well, er — do you think your mother would care to rent out a room to me? I have to leave where I am living now, and I'm trying to find another place."

He swallowed. "You mean move into our house and *live* with us?" Obviously his child's mind didn't regard having a teacher at such close quarters as a blessing.

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She smiled reassuringly. "I won't interfere with you in your spare time, Johnny. I think I'll walk home with you now — I'd like to know as soon as possible."

"We'll have to take the bus, Miss Prince, it's pretty far out," he told her.

It was even farther than she had expected it to be, a weather-beaten, rather depressing-looking farm-type of building, well beyond the last straggling suburbs, in full open country. It was set back from the road, and the whole area around it had an air of desolation and neglect. Its unpainted shutters hung askew, and the porch roof was warped and threatened to topple over at one end.

Something *could* have happened out here quite easily, she thought, judging by the looks of the place alone.

A toilworn, timid-looking woman came forward to meet them as they neared the door, wiping her hands on an apron. "Mom, this is my teacher, Miss Prince," Johnny introduced.

At once the woman's expression became even more harassed and intimidated. "You been doing something you shouldn't again? Johnny, why can't you be a good boy?"

"No, this has nothing to do with Johnny's conduct," Emily Prince hastened to explain. She repeated the request for lodging she had already made to the boy.

It was obvious, at a glance, that the suggestion frightened the woman. "I dunno," she kept saying. "I dunno what Mr. Mason will say about it. He ain't in right now."

Johnny was registered at school under the name of Gaines. Mr. Mason must be the boy's stepfather then. It was easy to see that the poor woman before her was completely dominated by him, whoever he was. That, in itself, from Miss Prince's angle, was a very suggestive factor. She made up her mind to get inside this house if she had to coax, bribe, or browbeat her way in.

She opened her purse, took out a large-size bill, and allowed it to be seen in her hand, in readiness to seal the bargain.

The boy's mother was obviously swayed by the sight of it but was still being held back by fear of something. "We could use the money, of course," she wavered. "But — but wouldn't it be too far out for you, here?"

Miss Prince faked a slight cough. "Not at all. The country air would be good for me. Couldn't I at least see one of the rooms?" she coaxed. "There wouldn't be any harm in that, would there?"

"N-no, I suppose not," Mrs. Mason faltered.

She led the way up a badly creaking inner staircase. "There's really only one room fit for anybody," she apologized.

"I'd only want it temporarily," Miss Prince assured her. "Maybe a week or two at the most."

She looked around. It really wasn't

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as bad as she had been led to expect by the appearance of the house from the outside. In other words, it was the masculine share of the work, the painting and external repairing, that was remiss. The feminine share, the interior cleaning, was being kept up to the best of Mrs. Mason's ability. There was another little suggestive sidelight in that, thought Miss Prince.

She struck while the iron was hot. "I'll take it," she said firmly, and thrust the money she had been holding into the other's undecided hand before she had time to put forward any further objections.

That did the trick.

"I — I guess it's all right," Mrs. Mason breathed, guiltily wringing her hands in the apron. "I'll tell Mr. Mason it's just for the time being." She tried to smile to make amends for her own trepidation. "He's not partial to having strangers in with us —"

"Why?" Miss Prince asked in her own mind, with a flinty question mark.

"But you being Johnny's teacher — when will you be wanting to move in with us?"

Miss Prince had no intention of relinquishing her tactical advantage. "I may as well stay, now that I'm out here," she said. "I can have my things sent out."

She closed the door of her new quarters and sat down to think.

The sun was already starting to go down when she heard an approaching tread coming up the neglected dirt track that led to the door. She edged over to the window and peered cautiously down. Mason, if that was he, was singularly unprepossessing, even villainous-looking at first glance, much more so than she had expected him to be. He was thick-set, strong as a steer in body, with bushy black brows and small, alert eyes. He had removed a disreputable, shapeless hat just as he passed below her window, and was wiping his completely bald head with a soiled bandanna. The skin of his scalp was sunburned, and ridged like dried leather.

She left the window and hastened across the room to gain the doorway and overhear his first reaction to the news of her being there. She strained her ears. This first moment or two was going to offer an insight that was never likely to repeat itself, no matter how long she stayed in this house.

"Where's Ed?" she heard him grunt unsociably. This was the first inkling she had had that there was still another member of the household.

"Still over in town, I guess," she heard Mrs. Mason answer. She was obviously in mortal terror as she nerved herself to make the unwelcome announcement — the listener above could tell by the very ring of her voice. "Johnny's teacher's come to stay with us — a little while."

There was suppressed savagery in his rejoinder. "What'd you do that for?" And then a sound followed that Emily Prince couldn't identify for a second. A sort of quick, staggering footfall. A moment later she

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realized what it must have been. He had given the woman a violent push to express his disapproval.

She heard her whimper: "She's up there right now, Dirk."

"Get rid of her!" was the snarling answer.

"I can't, Dirk, she already give me the money, and — and she ain't going to be here but a short spell anyway."

She heard him come out stealthily below her, trying to listen up just as she was trying to listen down. An unnatural silence fell, then prolonged itself unnaturally. It was like a grotesque cat-and-mouse play, one of them directly above the other, both reconnoitering at once.

He turned and went back again at last, when she was about ready to keel over from the long strain of holding herself motionless. She crept back inside her room and drew a long breath.

If that hadn't been a guilty reaction, what was? But still it wasn't evidence by any means.

The porch floor throbbed again, and someone else had come in. This must be the Ed she had heard them talk about. She didn't try to listen this time. There would never be a second opportunity quite like the first. Whatever was said to him would be in a careful undertone. Mrs. Mason came out shortly after, called up: "Miss Prince, like to come down to supper?"

The teacher steeled herself, opened the door, and stepped out. This was going to be a battle of wits. On their side they had an animal-like craftiness. On hers she had intellect, a trained mind, and self-control.

She felt she was really better equipped than they for warfare of this sort. She went down to enter the first skirmish.

They were at the table already eating — such a thing as waiting for her had never entered their heads. They ate crouched over, and that gave them the opportunity of watching her surreptitiously. Mrs. Mason said: "You can sit here next to Johnny. This is my husband. And this is my stepson, Ed."

The brutality on Ed's face was less deeply ingrained than on Mason's. It was only a matter of degree, however. Like father, like son.

"Evenin'," Mason grunted.

The son only nodded, peering upward at her in a half-baleful, half-suspicious way, taking her measure.

They ate in silence for a while, though she could tell that all their minds were busy on the same thing: her presence here, trying to decide what it might mean.

Finally Mason spoke. "Reckon you'll be staying some time?"

"No," she said quietly, "just a short while."

The son spoke next, after a considerable lapse of time. She could tell he'd premeditated the question for a full ten minutes. "How'd you happen to pick our place?"

"I knew Johnny, from my class. And it's quieter out here."

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She caught the flicker of a look passing among them. She couldn't read its exact meaning, whether acceptance of her explanation or skepticism.

They shoved back their chairs, one after the other, got up and turned away, without a word of apology. Mason sauntered out into the dark beyond the porch. Ed Mason stopped to strike a match to a cigarette he had just rolled. Even in the act of doing that, however, she caught his head turned slightly toward her, watching her when he thought she wasn't looking.

The older man's voice sounded from outside: "Ed, come out here a minute, I want to talk to you."

She knew what about — they were going to compare impressions, possibly plot a course of action.

The first battle was a draw.

She got up and went after Mrs. Mason. "I'll help you with the dishes." She wanted to get into that kitchen.

She couldn't see it at first. She kept using her eyes, scanning the floor surreptitiously while she wiped Mrs. Mason's thick, chipped crockery. Finally she thought she detected something. A shadowy bald patch, so to speak. It was both cleaner than the surrounding area, as though it had been scrubbed vigorously, and at the same time it was overcast. There were the outlines of a stain still faintly discernible. But it wasn't very conspicuous, just the shadow of a shadow.

She said to herself: "*She'll* tell me. I'll find out what I want to know."

She moved aimlessly around, pretending to dry off something, until she was standing right over it. Then she pretended to fumble her cloth, let it drop. She bent down, and planted the flat of her hand squarely on the shadowy place, as if trying to retain her balance. She let it stay that way for a moment.

She didn't have to look at the other woman. A heavy mug slipped through her hands and shattered resoundingly at her feet. Emily Prince straightened up, and only then glanced at her. Mrs. Mason's face had whitened a little. She averted her eyes.

"She's told me," Miss Prince said to herself with inward satisfaction.

There hadn't been a word exchanged between the two of them.

She went upstairs to her room a short while after. If somebody had been murdered in the kitchen, what disposal had been made of the body? Something must have been done with it — a thing like that just doesn't disappear.

She sat on the edge of the cot, wondering: "Am I going to have nerve enough to sleep here tonight, under the same roof with a couple of murderers?" She drew the necessary courage, finally, from an unexpected quarter. The image of Detective Kendall flashed before her mind, laughing uproariously at her. "I certainly am! I'll show him whether I'm right or not!" And she proceeded to blow out the lamp and lie down.

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In the morning sunlight the atmosphere of the house was less macabre. She rode in to school with Johnny on the bus, and for the next six hours put all thoughts of the grisly matter she was engaged upon out of her mind, while she devoted herself to parsing, syntax, and participles.

After she had dismissed class that afternoon she went to her former quarters to pick up a few belongings. This was simply to allay suspicion on the part of the Masons. She left the greater part of her things undisturbed, to be held for her.

She was waiting for the bus, her parcels beside her, when Kendall came into sight on the opposite side of the street. He was the last person she wanted to meet under the circumstances. She pretended not to recognize him, but it didn't work. He crossed over to her, stopped, touched his hat-brim, and grinned. "You seem to be moving. Give you a hand with those?"

"I can manage," she said distantly.

He eyed the bus route speculatively, then followed it with his gaze out toward her eventual destination. "It wouldn't be out to the Mason place?" Which was a smarter piece of deduction than she had thought him capable of.

"It happens to be."

To her surprise his face sobered. "I wouldn't fool around with people of that type," he said earnestly. "It's not the safest thing, you know."

Instantly she whirled on him, to take advantage of the flaw she thought she detected in his line of reasoning. "You're being inconsistent, aren't you? If something happened out there which they want to keep hidden, I agree it's not safe. But *you* say nothing happened out there. Then why shouldn't it be safe?"

"Look," he said patiently, "you're going at this from the wrong angle. There's a logical sequence to things like this." He told off his fingers at her, as though she were one of her own pupils. "First, somebody has to be missing or unaccounted for. Second, the body itself, or evidence sufficiently strong to take the place of an actual body, has to be brought to light. The two of them are interchangeable, but one or the other of them always has to precede an assumption of murder. That's the way we work. *Your* first step is a composition written by an eight-year-old child. Even in the composition itself, which is your whole groundwork, there's no direct evidence of any kind. No assault was seen by the kid, no body of any victim was seen either before or after death. In other words, you're reading an imaginary crime between the lines of an account that's already imaginary in itself. You can't get any further away from facts than that."

She loosed a blast of sarcasm at him sufficient to have withered the entire first three rows of any of her classes. "You're wasting your breath, my textbook expert. The trouble with hard-and-fast rules is that they al-

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ways let a big chunky exception slip by."

He shoved a helpless palm at her. "But there's nobody missing, man, woman or child, within our entire jurisdiction, and that goes out well beyond the Mason place. Word would have come in to us by now if there were! How're you going to get around that?"

"Then why don't you go out after it?" she flared. "Why don't you take this main road, this interstate highway that runs through here, and zone it off, and then work your way back along it, zone by zone, and find out if anyone's missing from other jurisdictions? Believe me," she added crushingly, "the only reason I suggest *you* do it is that you have the facilities and I haven't!"

He nodded with tempered consideration. "That could be done," he admitted. "I'll send out inquiries to the main townships along the line. I'd hate to have to give my reasons for checking up, though, in case I was ever pinned down to it: 'A kid in school here wrote a composition in which he mentioned he saw his mother scrubbing the kitchen floor at two in the morning.' " He grinned ruefully. "Now why don't you just let it go at that and leave it in our hands? In case I get a bite on any of my inquiries, I could drop out there myself and look things over —"

She answered this with such vehemence that he actually retreated a step. "I'll do my own looking over, thank you! I mayn't know all the rules in the textbook, but at least I'm able to think for myself. My mind isn't in handcuffs! Here comes my bus. Good day, Mr. Kendall!"

He thrust his hat back and scratched under it. "Whew!" she heard him whistle softly to himself, as she clambered aboard with her baggage.

It was still too early in the day for the two men to be on hand when she reached the Mason place. She found Mrs. Mason alone in the kitchen. A stolen glance at the sector of flooring that had been the focus of her attention the previous night revealed a flagrant change. Something had been done to it since then, and whatever it was, the substance used must have been powerfully corrosive. The whole surface of the wood was now bleached and shredded, as though it had been eaten away by something. Its changed aspect was far more incriminating now than if it had been allowed to remain as it was. They had simply succeeded in proving that the stain was *not* innocent, by taking such pains to efface it. However, it was no longer evidence now, even if it had been to start with. It was only a place where evidence had been.

She opened the back door and looked out at the peaceful sunlit fields that surrounded the place, with a wall of woodland in the distance. In one direction, up from the house, they had corn growing. The stalks were head-high, could have concealed

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anything. A number of black specks — birds — were hovering above one particular spot, darting busily in and out. They'd rise above it and circle and then go down again; but they didn't stray very far from it. Only that one place seemed to hold any attraction for them.

Down the other way, again far off — so far off as to be almost indistinguishable — she could make out a low quadrangular object that seemed to be composed of cobblestones or large rocks. It had a dilapidated shed over it on four uprights. A faint, wavering footpath led to it. "What's that?" she asked.

Mrs. Mason didn't answer for a moment. Then she said, somewhat unwillingly: "Used to be our well. Can't use it now, needs shoring up. Water's all sediment."

"Then where do you get water from?" Miss Prince asked.

"We've been going down the road and borrowing it from the people at the next place down, carrying it back in a bucket. It's a long ways to go, and they don't like it much neither."

Miss Prince waited a moment, to keep the question from sounding too leading. Then she asked casually: "Has your well been unfit to use for very long?"

She didn't really need the answer. New grass was sprouting everywhere, but it had barely begun to overgrow the footpath. She thought the woman's eyes avoided her, but that might have been simply her chronic hangdog look. " 'Bout two or three weeks," she mumbled reluctantly.

Birds agitated in a cornfield. A well suddenly unfit for use for the last two or three weeks. And then, in a third direction, straight over and across, the woods, secretive and brooding. Three possibilities.

She said to herself: "She told me something I wanted to know once before. Maybe I can get her to tell me what I want to know now." Those who live in the shadow of fear have poor defenses. The teacher said briskly: "I think I'll go for a nice long stroll in the open."

She put her to a test, probably one of the most peculiar ever devised. Instead of turning and striking out at once, as a man would have in parting from someone, she began to retreat slowly, half-turned backwards toward her as she drew away, chattering as she went, as though unable to tear herself away.

She retreated first in the general direction of the cornfield, as though intending to ramble among the stalks. The woman just stood there immobile in the doorway, looking after her.

The teacher closed in again, as though inadvertently, under necessity of something she had just remembered. "Oh, by the way, could you spare me an extra chair for my room. I —"

Then when she again started to part company with her, it was in a diametrically opposite direction, along the footpath that led to the well. "Any kind of a chair will do,"

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she called back talkatively. "Just so long as it has a seat and four —"

The woman just stood there, eyeing her without a flicker.

She changed her mind, came back again the few yards she had already traveled. "The sun's still hot, even this late," she prattled. She pretended to touch the top of her head. "I don't think I care to walk in the open. I think I'll go over that way instead — those woods look nice and cool from here. I always did like to roam around in woods —"

The woman's eyes seemed to be a little larger now, and she swallowed hard. Miss Prince could distinctly see the lump go down the scrawny lines of her throat. She started to say something, then she didn't after all. It was obvious, the way her whole body had seemed to lean forward for a moment, then subside against the door-frame. Her hands, inert until now, had begun to mangle her apron.

But not a sound came from her. Yet, though the test seemed to have failed, it had succeeded.

"I know the right direction now," Miss Prince was saying to herself grimly, as she trudged along. "It's in the woods. It's somewhere in the woods."

She went slowly. Idly. Putting little detours and curleycues into her line of progress, to seem aimless, haphazard. She knew, without turning, long after the house was a tiny thing behind her, that the woman was still there in the doorway, straining her eyes after her, watching her all the way to the edge of the woods. She knew, too, that that had been a give-and-take back there. The woman had told her what she wanted to know, but she had told the woman something too. If nothing else, that she wasn't quite as scatterbrained, as frivolous, as she had seemed to be about which direction to take for her stroll. Nothing definite maybe, but just a suspicion that she wasn't out here just for her health.

She'd have to watch her step with them, as much as they'd have to watch theirs with her. A good deal depended on whether the woman was an active ally of the two men, or just a passive thrall involved against her will.

She was up to the outermost trees now, and soon they had closed around her. The house and its watcher was gone from sight, and a pall of cool blue twilight had dimmed everything. She made her way slowly forward. The trees were not set thickly together but they covered a lot of ground.

She had not expected anything so miraculous as to stumble on something the moment she stepped in here. It was quite likely that she would leave none the wiser this time. But she intended returning here again and again if necessary, until —

She was getting tired now, and she was none too sure of her whereabouts. She spotted a half-submerged stump protruding from the damp, moldy turf and sat down on it, fighting down a suspicion that was

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trying to form in the back of her mind that she was lost. A thing like that, if it ever got to that Kendall's ears, would be all that was needed to complete his hilarity at her expense. The stump was green all over with some sort of fungus, but she was too tired to care. The ground in here remained in a continual state of moldy dampness, she noticed. The sun never had a chance to reach through the leafy ceiling of the trees and dry it out.

She had been sitting there perhaps two minutes at the most, when a faint scream of acute fright reached her from a distance. It was thin and piping, and must have been thin even at its source. She jarred to her feet. It had sounded like the voice of a child, not a grown-up. It repeated itself, and two others joined in with it, as frightened as the first, if less shrilly acute. She started to run, as fast as the trackless ground would allow, toward the direction from which she believed the commotion was coming.

She could hear water splashing, and then without any warning she came crashing out onto the margin of a sizable and completely screened-off woodland pool. It was shaped like a figure 8.

At the waist, where it narrowed, there was an irregular bridge of flat stones, although the distances between them were unmanageable except by sprinting. There was a considerable difference in height between the two sections, and the water coursed into the lower one in a placid, silken waterfall stretching the entire width of the basin. This lower oval was one of the most remarkable sights she had ever seen. It was shallow, the water was only about knee-high in it, and under the water was dazzling creamy-white sand. There was something clean and delightful-looking about it.

Two small boys in swimming trunks, one of them Johnny Gaines, were arched over two of the stepping-stones, frantically tugging at a third boy who hung suspended between them, legs scissoring wildly over the water and the sleek sand below. "Keep moving them!" she heard Johnny shriek just as she got there. "Don't let 'em stay still!"

She couldn't understand the reason for their terror. The water below him certainly wasn't deep enough to drown anybody —

"Help us, lady!" the other youngster screamed. "Help us get him back up over the edge here!"

She kicked off her high-arched shoes, picked her way out to them along the stones, displaced the nearest one's grip with her own on the floundering object of rescue. He wouldn't come up for a minute, even under the added pull of her adult strength, and she couldn't make out what was holding him. There was nothing visible but a broil of sand-smoking water around his legs. She hauled backwards from him with every ounce of strength in her body, and suddenly he came free.

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The three of them immediately retreated to the safety of the bank, and she followed. "Why were you so frightened?" she asked.

"Don't you know what that is?" Johnny said, still whimpering. "Quicksand! Once that gets you —"

There could be no mistaking the genuineness of their fright. Johnny's two companions had scuttled off for home without further ado, finishing their dressing as they went.

"Look, I'll show you." He picked up a fist-sized rock and threw it in. What happened sent a chill down her spine. The stone lay there for a moment, motionless and perfectly visible through the crystalline water. Then there was a slight concentric swirl of the sand immediately around it, a dimple appeared on its surface, evened out again, and suddenly the stone wasn't there any more. The sand lay as smooth and satiny as ever. The delayed timing was what was so horrible to watch.

"We'd better go," she said, taking a step backward from it.

"The upper pool's all right, it's only got gravel at the bottom," Johnny was explaining, wiping his hair with a handful of leaves.

She didn't hear him. She was examining the branch of a bush growing beside the bank that had swung back into place in her wake. It formed an acute angle such as is never found in nature. It was badly fractured halfway along its length. She reached for a second branch, a third, and fingered them. Their spines were all broken the same way.

Her face paled a little. She moved around the entire perimeter of the bush, handling its shoots. Then she examined the neighboring bushes. The fractures were all on the landward side, away from the pool. The tendrils that overhung the water itself — that anyone in difficulties in the sand could have been expected to grasp — were all undamaged, arching gracefully the way they had grown.

She came away with a puzzled look on her face. But only that, no increased pallor.

At the edge of the woods, just before they came out into the open again, the youngster beside her coaxed plaintively: "Miss Prince, don't gimme 'way about going swimming in there, will you?"

"Won't they notice your hair's damp?"

"Sure, but I can say I went swimming in the mill-pond, down by the O'Brien place. I'm allowed to go there."

"Oh, it's just that — that place we just came from they don't want you to go near?"

He nodded.

That could have been because of the quicksand. Then again it could have been for other reasons. "Have they always told you to keep away from there?" she hazarded.

It paid off. "No'm, only lately," he answered.

Only lately. She decided she was

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going to pay another visit to that cannibal sandbed. With a long pole, perhaps.

The evening meal began in deceptive calmness. Although the two Masons continued to watch her in sullen silence, there seemed to be less of overt suspicion and more of just casual curiosity in their underbrow glances. But a remark from Johnny suddenly brought on a crisis when she was least expecting it. The youngster didn't realize the dynamite in his question. "Did I pass, in that composition I handed in?" he asked all at once. And then, before she could stop him in time, he blurted out: "You know, the one about the dream I had, where I came down and —"

Without raising eyes from the table she could sense the tightening of the tension around her. It was as noticeable as though an electric current were streaking around the room. Ed Mason forgot to go ahead eating, he just sat looking down at his plate. Then his father stopped too, and looked at his plate. There was a soft slur of shoe-leather inching along the floor from somewhere under the table.

Mrs. Mason said in a stifled voice, "Sh-h, Johnny."

There was only one answer she could make. "I haven't got around to reading it yet." Something made her add: "It's up there on the table in my room right now."

Mason resumed eating. Then Ed followed suit.

She had given them all the rope they needed. Let them go ahead and hang themselves now. If the composition disappeared, as she was almost certain it was going to, that would be as good as an admission that —

She purposely lingered below, helping Mrs. Mason as she had the night before. When she came out of the kitchen and made ready to go up to her room, they were both sprawled out in the adjoining room. Whether one of them had made a quick trip up the stairs and down again, she had no way of knowing — until she got up there herself.

Mason's eyes followed her in a strangely steadfast way as she started up the stairs. Just what the look signified she couldn't quite make out. It made her uneasy, although it wasn't threatening in itself. It had some other quality that she couldn't figure out, a sort of shrewd complacency. Just before she reached the turn and passed from sight he called out: "Have a good night's sleep, Miss." She saw a mocking flicker of the eyes pass between him and Ed.

She didn't answer. The hand with which she was steadying the lamp she was taking up with her shook a little as she let herself into her room and closed the door. She moved a chair in front of it as a sort of barricade. Then she hurried to the table and sifted through the homework papers stacked on it.

It was still there. It hadn't been

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touched. It was out of the alphabetical order she always kept her papers in, but it had been left there for her to read at will.

That puzzled, almost crestfallen look that she'd had at the pool that afternoon came back to her face again. She'd been positive she would find it missing.

How long she'd been asleep she could not tell, but it must have been well after midnight when something roused her. She didn't know exactly what it was at first; then as she sat up and put her feet to the floor, she identified it as a strong vibration coming from some place below. As though two heavy bodies were threshing about in a struggle down there.

She quickly put something on and went out to listen in the hall. A chair went over with a vicious crack. A table jarred. She could hear an accompaniment of hard breathing, an occasional wordless grunt. But she was already on her way down by that time, all further thought of concealment thrown to the winds.

Mason and his son were locked in a grim, heaving struggle that floundered from one end of the kitchen to the other, dislodging everything in its path. Mrs. Mason was a helpless onlooker, holding a lighted lamp back beyond danger of upsetting, and ineffectually whimpering: "Don't! Dirk! Ed! Let each other be now!"

"Hold the door open, quick, Ma! I've got him!" Mason gasped just as Miss Prince arrived on the scene.

The woman edged over sidewise along the wall and flung the door back. Mason catapulted his adversary out into the night. Then he snatched up a chicken lying in a pool of blood over in a corner, sent that after him, streaking a line of red drops across the floor. "Thievin' drunkard!" he shouted, shaking a fist at the sprawling figure outside. "Now you come back when you sober up, and I'll let you in!" He slammed the door, shot the bolt home. "Clean up that mess, Ma," he ordered gruffly. "That's one thing I won't 'low, is no chicken-stealing drunkards in my house!" He strode past the open-mouthed teacher without seeming to see her, and stamped up the stairs.

"He's very strict about that," Mrs. Mason whispered confidentially. "Ed don't mean no harm, but he helps himself to things that don't belong to him when he gets likkered up." She sloshed water into a bucket, reached for a scrubbing brush, sank wearily to her knees, and began to scour ruddy circles of chicken blood on the floor. "I just got through doin' this floor with lye after the last time," she mumbled.

Miss Prince found her voice at last. It was still a very small, shaky one. "Has — has this happened before?"

"Every so often," she admitted. "Last time he run off with the O'Briens' Ford, drove it all the way out here just like it belonged to him. Mr. Mason had to sneak it back

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where he took it from, at that hour of the night."

An odor of singeing felt suddenly assailed the teacher's nostrils. She looked, discovered a felt hat, evidently the unmanageable Ed's, fallen through the open scuttle-hole of the wood-burning stove onto the still-warm ashes below. She drew it up and beat it against the back of a chair.

There was a slight rustle from the doorway and Johnny was standing there in his night-shirt, sleepily rubbing one eye. "I had another of those dreams, Ma," he complained. "I dreamed the whole house was shaking and —"

"You go back to bed, hear?" his mother said sharply. "And don't go writin' no more compositions about it in school, neither!" She fanned out her skirt, trying to screen the crimson vestiges on the floor from him. "Another of them wood-varmints got into the house, and your Pa and your Uncle Ed had to kill it, that's all!"

Miss Prince turned and slunk up the stairs, with a peculiar look on her face — the look of someone who has made a complete fool of herself. She slammed the door of her room behind her with — for her — unusual asperity. She went over to the window and stood looking out. Far down the highway she could make out the dwindling figure of Ed Mason in the moonlight, steering a lurching, drunken course back toward town and singing, or rather hooting, at the top of his voice as he went.

"Appearances!" she said bitterly. "Appearances!"

She always seemed to meet Kendall just when she didn't want to. He appeared at her elbow next morning just as she alighted from the bus in town. "How're things going? Get onto anything yet?"

She made a move to brush by him without answering.

"I haven't received anything definite yet on any of those inquiries I sent out," he went on.

She turned and faced him. "You won't, either. You can forget the whole thing! All right, laugh, you're entitled to it! You were right and I was wrong."

"You mean you don't think —"

"I mean I practically saw the same thing the boy did, with my own eyes, last night and it was just a family row! I've made a fool out of myself and gone to a lot of trouble, for nothing."

"What're you going to do?"

"I'm going to pack my things and leave."

"Don't take it too hard —" he tried to console her.

She stalked off. At least, she had to admit to herself, he'd been decent enough not to say, "I told you so," and laugh right in her face. Oh, well, he was probably saving it up to enjoy it more fully back at the station house with his cronies.

Mrs. Mason was alone in the kitchen again when she returned

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that afternoon to get her things together. There hadn't been time before school in the morning. The woman looked at her questioningly, but the teacher didn't say anything about her imminent departure. Time enough to announce it when she came down again.

In her room she picked up the dress she'd had on the afternoon before and started to fold it over. Something caught her eye. There was a stain, a blotch, that she hadn't noticed until now. She looked at it more closely, as though unable to account for it. Then she remembered sitting down on a half-submerged stump for a moment, just before hearing the boys' cries of distress. "No more appearances!" she warned herself, and tossed the dress into the open bag.

She picked up the batch of school papers lying on the table to follow suit with them. There was that composition of Johnny's that had started all the trouble. She started to reread it. She was standing up at first. Before she had finished she was seated once more. She turned and looked over at the dress she had just put away. Then she got up and took it out again.

There was a timid knock on the door and Mrs. Mason looked in at her. "I thought maybe you'd like me to help you get your things together," she faltered.

Miss Prince eyed her coolly. "I didn't say anything about leaving. What gave you that idea? I'm staying — at least, for a little while longer."

The woman's hand started out toward her, in a palsied gesture of warning. She seemed about to say something. Then she quickly closed the door.

Her main worry was to get down the venerable stairs without causing them to creak and betray her. The house lay steeped in midnight silence. She knew that Mason and his son were inveterate snorers when asleep — she had heard them at other times, even downstairs when they dozed after meals. Tonight she could not hear them.

She didn't use the flashlight she had brought with her, for fear of attracting attention while still within the house. The real need for that would be later, out in the woods. The stairs accomplished without mishap, it was an easy matter to slip the bolt on the back door and leave without much noise. There was a full moon out, but whether it would be much help where she was going, she doubted.

She stole around to the back of the rickety tool-house and retrieved the long-poled pitchfork she had concealed there earlier in the evening. Its tines were bent, and with a little manipulation, it might serve as a sort of grappling hook if — if there was anything for it to hook onto. A button was all she needed, a rotting piece of suiting. Evidence. Until she had that, she couldn't go to Kendall, she had to keep on working alone.

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Not after what she had admitted to him that morning.

She struck out across the silver-dappled fields. The trees closed around her finally, a maw of impenetrable blackness after the moonlight, and she brought her flashlight into play, following its wan direction-finder in and out among the looming, ghostly trunks.

The bed of quicksand loomed whitely even in the dark. There was something sinister about it, like a vast evil eye lying there in wait. The coating of water refracted the shine of her light to a big phosphorescent balloon when she cast the beam downward. She discovered her teeth chattering and clamped them shut. She looked around for something to balance her light, finally nested it in a bush so that the interlaced twigs supported it. She shifted a little farther along the bank and poised the pitchfork like someone about to spear fish.

She lunged out and downward with it. The soft feel of the treacherous sand as the tines dove in was transferred repugnantly along the pole to her hands. That was all she had time to notice. She didn't even see it sink in.

A leathery hand was pressed to the lower half of her face, a thick anaconda-like arm twined about her waist from behind, and the light winked out. Her wrists were caught together as they flew up from the pitchfork-pole, and held helpless.

"Got her, Ed?" a quiet voice said.

"Got her," a second voice answered.

There hadn't been any warning sound. They must have been lurking there ahead of her, to be able to spring the trap so unexpectedly.

Her pinioned hands were swung around behind her, brought together again. The hand had left her mouth. "You int'rested in what's down in there?" the man behind her asked threateningly.

"I don't know what you mean. Take your hands off me!"

"You know what we mean. And we know what you mean. Don't you suppose we're onto why you're hanging around our place? Now you'll get what you were lookin' for." He addressed his father. "Take off her shoes and stockings and lie 'em on the bank. Careful, don't tear 'em now."

"What's that for?"

"She came out here alone, see, early tomorrow morning, and it looked so pretty she went wading without knowing what it was, and it got her."

She kicked frantically, trying to stop them. She was helpless in their hands. Her ankles were caught, one at a time, and stripped.

"They'll dredge for her, won't they?" Dirk Mason mentioned with sinister meaning.

"She'll be on top, won't she?" was the grisly reassurance. "Once they get her out, they'll be no call for them to go ahead dredging any further down."

She ripped out a scream of harrowing intensity. If it had been twice as

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shrill, it couldn't have reached past the confines of these woods. And who was there in the woods to hear her? "Think we ought to stuff something in her mouth?" the older man asked.

"No, because we gotta figure on her being found later. Don't worry, no one'll hear her."

She was fighting now the way an animal fights for its life. But she was no match for the two of them. Not even a man would have been.

They were ready for the incredible thing they were about to do. "Grab her legs and swing her, so she goes out far enough." There was a moment of sickening indecision, while she swung suspended between them, clear of the ground. Then her spinning body shot away from them.

Water sprayed over her as she struck. The fall was nothing. It was like landing on a satin quilt, the sand was so soft. She rolled over, tore her arms free, and threshed to a kneeling position. There was that awful preliminary moment in which nothing happened, as with that stone she had seen Johnny throw in yesterday. Then a sudden pull, a *drawing*, started in — weak at first, barely noticeable, giving the impression of being easy to counteract. And each move she made wound the sand tighter around her bared feet, ankles, calves.

Meanwhile, something was happening on the bank, or at least, farther back in the woods; but she was only dimly aware of it, too taken up in her own floundering struggles. It reached her vaguely, like something through a heavy mist. An intermittent winking as of fireflies here and there, each one followed by a loud crack like the breaking of a heavy bough. Then heavy forms were crashing through the thickets in several directions at once, two of them fleeing along the edge of the pool, others fanning out farther back, as if to intercept them. There was one final crack, a fall, and then a breathless voice nearby said: "Don't shoot — I give up!"

A light, stronger than the one she had brought, suddenly flashed out, caught her, steadied, lighting up the whole pool. Her screams had dwindled to weak wails now, simply because she hadn't enough breath left. She was writhing there, still upright, but her legs already gone past the knees.

"Hurry up, help me with this girl!" a voice shouted somewhere behind the blinding light. "Don't you see what they've done to her?" The pole of the same pitchfork she had used was thrust out toward her. "Hang onto this!" She clutched it with both hands. A moment later a noosed rope had splashed into the water around her. "Pass your arms through that and tighten it around you. Grab hold now and kick out behind you!"

For minutes nothing happened; she didn't seem to move at all, though there must have been at least three of them pulling on the rope. "Are we hurting you?" Then suddenly

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there was a crumbling feeling of the sand around her trapped legs and she came free.

Kendall was one of them, of course, and even the brief glimpse she had of his face by torchlight made her wonder how she could have ever felt averse to running into him at any time. She certainly didn't feel that way now.

They carried her out of the woods in a "chair" made of their hands and put her into a police car waiting at the edge of the fields.

"You'd better get back there and go to work," she said. "Even before you got the rope around me, the downward pull had stopped, I noticed. I seemed to be standing on something . . . How did you get out here on time?"

"One of those inquiries I sent out finally paid off. A commercial traveler named Kenneth Johnson was reported missing, from way over in Jordanstown. He was supposed to show up at Indian River, out beyond here in the other direction, and he never got there — dropped from sight somewhere along the way, car and all. He was carrying quite a gob of money with him. He left three weeks ago, but it wasn't reported until now, because he was only expected back around this time. I only got word a half hour ago. I thought of the Masons right away, thanks to you. I started right out here with a couple of my partners to look around, never dreaming that you were still here yourself. Then a little past the next house down, the O'Brien place, we met the kid, Johnny, running along the road lickety-split, on his way to phone in to us and get help. His mother had finally got pangs of conscience and thrown off her fear of her husband and stepson long enough to try to save you from what she guessed was going to happen."

She went out there again first thing the next morning. Kendall came forward to meet her as she neared the pool. He told her they'd finally got the car out a little after daybreak, with the help of a farm-tractor run in under the trees, plenty of stout ropes, and some grappling hooks. She could see the weird-looking sand-encrusted shape standing there on the bank, scarcely recognizable for what it was.

"Kenneth Johnson, all right," Kendall said quietly, "and still inside it when we got it out. But murdered before he was ever swallowed up in the sand. I have a confession from the two Masons. He gave Ed a hitch back along the road that night. Mason got him to step in for a minute on some excuse or other, when they'd reached his place, so he'd have a chance to rifle his wallet. Johnson caught him in the act, and Mason and his father murdered him with a flatiron. Then they put him back in the car, drove him over here, and pushed it in. No need to go any closer, it's not a very pretty sight."

On the way back he asked: "But

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what made you change your mind so suddenly? Only yesterday morning when I met you you were ready to —"

"I sat down on a stump not far from the pool, and afterwards I discovered axle-grease on my dress. It was so damp and moldy in there that the clot that had fallen from the car hadn't dried out yet. Why should a car be driven in there where there was no road?

"But the main thing was still that composition of Johnny's. Remember where Johnny said the hat had fallen? Through the stove onto the ashes. But in the reenactment they staged for me, Ed Mason's hat also fell through the open scuttlehole in the stove onto the ashes below. Is it probable that a hat, flung off somebody's head in the course of a struggle, would land in the identical place *twice*? Hardly. Things like that just don't happen. The second hat had been deliberately placed there for me to see, to point up the similarity to what had happened before."

That night, safely back in her old quarters in town, she was going over back-schoolwork when her landlady knocked on the door. "There's a gentleman downstairs to see you. He says it's not business, but social."

Miss Prince smiled a little. "I think I know who it is. Tell him I'll be right down as soon as I've finished grading this composition."

She picked up the one Johnny Gaines had written. She marked it A-plus, the highest possible mark she could give, without bothering for once about grammar, punctuation, or spelling. Then she put on her hat, turned down the light, and went out to meet Kendall.

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"The Spirit of the Place" is one of Miss Phipps's rarer cases — an active investigation. Usually, you will recall, the spinster-sleuth is the very apotheosis of armchair detecting. Sitting in a railway carriage or in a tea shop or in the comfortable living room of her own home, Miss Phipps would simply listen to the facts as told by Inspector Tarrant; then without rising from her chair or seat, without having the advantages of inspecting the actual scene of the crime, without seeing or questioning any of the witnesses, she would calmly put the detectival data in their proper order and come up with the one and only solution — to Inspector Tarrant's tremendous surprise, of course, and professional benefit. But in "The Spirit of the Place," the little white-haired novelist, with her chubby pink face and drooping pince-nez, goes to the scene of the mystery — a Thirteenth Century "inn" possessed, it seems, by a malicious poltergeist.

Phyllis Bentley, one of England's most noted regional novelists, seldom writes "a mere mystery," however charming. Her stories reveal something of life and the passing parade. In "The Spirit of the Place" you will meet an interesting character — "the English Gentlewoman, a species now almost extinct." The Misses Harmond, proprietors of The Watch House Café, add more than an atmosphere of the past: they give a definite "tone" to the story.

THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE

by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

SOUTHSHIRE IS A CHARMING county," said Miss Marian Phipps, "and it is very agreeable to drive through it. One receives the impression of a spring frieze continually unrolling — a design of lambs, blossom, and daffodils repeated against a background of delicious green. I have almost stopped being ashamed of the cause of this outing."

The car's sudden swerve gave the measure of Detective-Inspector Tarrant's discomfiture. "Ashamed?" he queried.

"Ashamed," said the little novelist firmly. "Since our first meeting we have discussed three of your cases together," she went on, "and each time, by applying a knowledge of human nature —"

"Your knowledge of human nature," corrected Tarrant.

"— we reached a solution which later inquiry substantiated. But on this, the fourth occasion you have

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done me the honor of consulting me," continued Miss Phipps, "the application of our principle has proved inadequate. We have, or rather I have, been unable to elucidate the affair of the Watch House Café from your description of the persons concerned. I deeply regret my failure," said Miss Phipps, shaking her white head, "deeply. It distresses me all the more, because at the moment I am also at a loss in the short story I am writing. I am perplexed by one of my characters. I can't understand why my heroine at first declines to marry the hero, and later accepts him. I know she does so, but why I cannot tell. I will not conceal from you, my dear boy," concluded Miss Phipps mournfully, "that this double failure, indicating as it does a declining perceptive power, gives me a selfish distress in addition to my regret at being unable to help you."

Tarrant, somewhat abashed, stole a glance at his companion. Her hat, a mountain range of spiky bows, perched on her untidy white hair at an alarming angle; if her limp gray fur had never seen better days its life must have been grim indeed; her pince-nez drooped sideways, weighed down by the gold chain which attached them to the fat black button on her chest. Her pink face, now so downcast, resembled that of a rabbit even more than when she was in a cheerful mood. Decidedly she did not appear a likely person to assist a smart young detective-inspector. Tarrant sighed, and said in a would-be soothing tone:

"You'll feel differently when you've seen the place."

"It ought not to be necessary," mourned Miss Phipps. "The characters alone should be enough."

"But places have personality too, Miss Phipps," protested Tarrant's young American wife cheerfully, from the rear. "The Watch House certainly has plenty of that."

"Really?" said Miss Phipps, brightening. "Your husband didn't tell me that, my dear."

"It's one of the cutest little places I've ever seen," said Mary emphatically. "So very, *very* old."

"Indeed," remarked Miss Phipps. Her tone was noncommittal, for she thought the American view of architectural age might differ sharply from her own.

"It's just made up of archways and cellars and worm-eaten old beams," continued Mary with enthusiasm, "and mullioned windows with those tiny panes you call quarries."

Miss Phipps, more depressed than ever by her error in judgment, said mournfully, "Tell me more."

"The Watch House Café," chanted Mary, "has that name because it was formerly the watchman's house in the ancient city of Starminster, and was built in the Thirteenth Century, probably 1233."

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"Can it have mullioned windows, then, dear?" queried Miss Phipps.

"The present street frontage was added in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, when the building became the residence of the first mayor of Starminster," said Mary. A slight frown marred her attractive forehead, and she added, "I forget the date."

"It doesn't matter," said Miss Phipps hastily.

"In the Eighteenth Century the building passed into private hands," continued Mary in her clear, even tones. "Since then it has been used for several purposes; as a house, a library, a shop, and so on. For the last ten years it has been a café, under the management of the proprietors, the Misses Harmond."

"Daughters of the late Dean Harmond," supplied Tarrant.

"Yes, yes," said Miss Phipps, nodding. "I see the place quite clearly now. Old oak tables — really old and rather wobbly on their feet; fine old jugs holding delicious wild flowers; good blue crockery; raffia mats; waitresses with good manners and clean frocks, who disdain tips and never hurry; fine China tea a speciality of the house; excellent homemade jam, superb honey, lots of fresh fruit; cakes a little stale; and the bill twice as much as you expected."

"That's right!" exclaimed Tarrant.

"Miss Phipps, you're a grand person," said Mary.

Miss Phipps preened herself and felt more cheerful.

"The doorways are very low and the light's so dim you can't see them," added Tarrant with feeling.

"The waitresses wear lavender linen," concluded Mary.

"And this charming place," said Miss Phipps thoughtfully, "has been invaded by a poltergeist."

"I don't believe in poltergeists," snapped Tarrant.

"But you must admit, Bob," argued Mary, "that the occurrences are very strange. The café closes every night at 7. The Misses Harmond lock up the premises and then bicycle out to their little cottage in a nearby village."

"Sloping roof, hollyhocks," murmured Miss Phipps.

"And in the morning, when they unlock the café to admit the charwoman," continued Tarrant, "the place is in a frightful mess."

"How in a mess?"

"As if a cyclone had blown through it," said Mary.

"Trays of buns scattered all over the floor; cakes standing on end as if they'd been rolled like hoops; vases upset, brasses fallen from the walls; chairs and tables knocked over; cutlery and silver thrown out of their baskets; milk streaming over the counter; dabs of margarine on the tables," said Tarrant.

"You have seen it in that condition, clearly," said Miss Phipps. "Did the Misses Harmond call in the police?"

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"Yes and no," said Tarrant. "It was really Mary's doing that I came in."

"And he's not too pleased about it," said Mary. "You see, I often visit that café while I'm waiting for Bob to come off duty. I hang around there when he's due to come off, and then he knows where to find me and can buzz right along, or if his appointments have been switched and he can't come, he calls me up there. It's not so long since we were married, you remember," she added with a smile.

"He telephones you at the Watch House Café," said Miss Phipps. "Very proper. And so it was Mary who first heard about the poltergeist? I don't think I quite understood that before. Please tell me just how it happened, Mary."

"I was having a glass of tomato juice and waiting for Bob, about a quarter of 1," began Mary, as the car passed a notice announcing that this was Starminster. "Or rather, I was waiting for a glass of tomato juice — you do a lot of waiting in that café — when Miss Harmond herself came up to me, and said she was so sorry I had to wait, but they were a trifle disorganized that morning. Had I heard of their unfortunate experience? I said, no, I had not; so then she narrated it to me. I asked her if she had any notion who was the guilty person, and she said she had none, but her sister had a strange idea. Just then Bob came in, so she smiled and withdrew. Well, a few days later I was at the Watch House again, buying a few crackers — I mean, biscuits — for Bob, and Miss Harmond was serving me, and she looked very depressed, and I asked her if she had traced the mischief-doer. And it appeared that the disorder had occurred again! And it has continued to occur, two or three times each week, ever since. The younger Miss Harmond thinks it's a poltergeist — she's rather fond of romance, you know, and goes to church a great deal. The older doesn't seem to know what to think. They have both grown thin and ill, worrying about it; so at last I said to them: 'Now, Miss Harmond, why don't you ask my Bob to help you? I'm sure he'd be delighted to solve your little problem.' They hesitated and said they would talk it over, and said they dreaded the publicity of calling in the police, but at last they agreed that if the mischief occurred again, they would ask for Bob's unofficial assistance. Next morning they called me up, very early, to say it had happened again, and we both went round right away, and there was the café, looking like it had been sitting in the path of a tornado."

"Thank you," said Miss Phipps. "A very succinct and significant account. Am I right in believing that no money is stolen on these occasions?"

"That's right. Luckily Miss Harmond always puts the day's receipts in the Southshire Bank's night-safe on her way home — you know, one

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of those slits in the bank wall," explained Tarrant.

"What one notices more and more in this case," mused Miss Phipps, "is the absence of any motive for these outrages."

Tarrant, guiding the car slowly along quiet narrow back streets, went on, "I've been thoroughly into the matter of effecting an entrance. The café doors have huge old keys, always carried by Miss Harmond, and enormous bolts as well. The windows are too small for a Pekinese to climb through, much less a child or a grown person. The only possible explanation seems to be that someone hides in the café at night, before it is closed, but Miss Harmond rejects that explanation. She says they now search the place each night before leaving it. I've tried putting a man outside and inside to watch the place, at irregular intervals," he continued. "I can't do anything on a large scale, as they seem unwilling to report it officially. When the inside man is on, the mischief stops, but the moment I take him off, it starts again."

"Remembering the case of the ubiquitous mannequin," said Miss Phipps, "I'm sure you have made searching inquiries as to the days when the poltergeist works."

"I have," replied Tarrant emphatically. "But it didn't tell me anything. The poltergeist, if you like to call it that, works irregularly, on different days of the week. The only common factors I could discover in the times of the different outrages — you see I'm learning from you, Miss Phipps — the only common factor I could discover was that the mischief always took place on the morning following —"

"A fine day," suggested Miss Phipps softly.

Tarrant swung the car expertly into position beside the curb, applied the brake, and turned upon Miss Phipps.

"Now how did you guess that?" he said.

"I never guess," said Miss Phipps firmly. "I merely make use of my novelist's imagination."

Tarrant snorted. "You two go in," he said, helping Miss Phipps to descend, "while I park the car. The regulations are very strict in these narrow streets."

The two women slowly crossed the quiet sunny pavement to the café. As they climbed the steep stone steps into the ancient Watch House they were pounced upon by a small elderly lady, who told them their own names and their errand with much good will and excitement, before passing on.

"But if all the customers know about the poltergeist," began Miss Phipps.

"Some of the Starminster residents know," replied Mary, "but by no means all, from what I've seen. And none of the visitors. I just can't see Miss Harmond advertising her café as 'The Place Where the Poltergeist Plays.' Only her intimate circle is aware of her little difficulty."

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"What a clear intelligence you have, my dear," said Miss Phipps admiringly. "It's a pleasure to work with you. You have the faculty of classification."

They took the only vacant table, which stood beneath one of the tiny windows, sat down, and ordered coffee. The dark little room was so exactly as Miss Phipps had imagined it that she smiled to herself as she looked around. She was observing with pleasure the crest in the window above her head when she heard her own name being spoken.

"It is exceedingly kind of Miss Phipps," said a gentle voice. "We know her books, of course, and we are honored by her interest. I greatly hope she will be able to help us, as otherwise I fear we shall be forced to leave our dear little Watch House."

Miss Phipps turned. The speaker was, naturally, one of the Misses Harmond. She loomed above the table, tall and stately, very thin, with aquiline features, mild gray eyes, and lustrous white hair coiled neatly about her head. Miss Harmond wore a high-necked gray linen dress, strong black-laced shoes with low heels, and a black velvet ribbon round her throat; she held her hands clasped lightly in front of her waist, and seemed to scent the air very delicately with lavender. "The English Gentlewoman, species now almost extinct," thought Miss Phipps, greeting her.

"It will be just too bad if you and Bob can't do something to keep Miss Harmond in the Watch House," Mary was saying. "She's an institution here, and we couldn't bear to lose her."

Miss Harmond smiled dolefully.

"It is too kind of you to say so, dear Mrs. Tarrant," she said in her gentle tones. "It would indeed be a terrible blow to my sister and myself if we were obliged to leave the Watch House, but we cannot endure this persecution much longer, I'm afraid. The senselessness of it all, the suspense of waiting for it to happen, the feeling that somewhere we have an enemy who wants to harm us —"

She broke off, and Miss Phipps, studying her sympathetically, saw that tears had come to her eyes.

"There's the pecuniary loss too," suggested Mary.

Miss Harmond gave a gentle smile, and moved quietly away to the counter, where a plumper and rosier edition of herself was giving change to a dapper little man in a gray suit.

"That is Miss Jessica Harmond," explained Mary, following the direction of Miss Phipps's eyes. "Very English types, the Harmonds, aren't they?"

"Yes," murmured Miss Phipps. "Sweet Williams. Rectory lawns. That's what makes it so strange."

"Yes — who could be such a brute as to want to hurt them?" said Mary.

"Who indeed?" sighed Miss Phipps. "They look very harassed, poor dears."

At this moment Tarrant entered the café, nodding to the dapper man in gray as he sat down.

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"Who is that man, Bob?" asked Mary at once. "I often see him here."

"That's the manager of Quanders and Quanders," replied Tarrant. "You remember Quanders," he added, turning to Miss Phipps, "the big drapers at Brittlesea."

"I'm not likely to forget them," replied Miss Phipps, "seeing how long you talked to me about the Quanders' mannequin."

A look of inquiry blossomed in Mary's candid eyes, and Miss Phipps, repentant, explained hastily: "An earlier investigation, my dear, before he met you. We sometimes refer to it as the case of 'The Tuesday and Friday Thefts'."

"Miss Harmond," said Mary, "thinks mannequins are vulgar. She thinks Quanders are vulgar, she thinks lipstick is vulgar, she thinks women who smoke are vulgar. I'm never quite sure," concluded Mary with disarming candor, "that she doesn't think me vulgar. A very English type."

Miss Phipps surveyed her thoughtfully. "You should be a great help to your husband in his career, my dear," she said.

"Miss Phipps, you're a grand person," said Mary, "but I don't trust you when you make remarks like that. Unless I am altogether wrong, something is seething beneath your hat. Have you solved the poltergeist mystery?"

"I might guess the poltergeist's identity, or rather limit its identity to one of a known number of persons," said Miss Phipps. "I might also guess part of the motive. But the reason for that motive, the feeling behind it, I cannot fathom."

Tarrant showed the disappointment he felt. "Can't you at least advise me what steps to take?" he said.

"Yes, I think I might do that," said Miss Phipps. "But not here. Let us go." She drew her fur about her throat. "Is my hat straight, dear?" she said.

Mary was trying to frame a reply combining both truth and tact when a sudden tremendous boom reverberated in the rafters above their head. Miss Phipps jumped to her feet. "What was that?" she cried.

"Only Big Edmund, the cathedral bell — it rings for ten minutes every day at noon," said Tarrant.

"Good heavens!" said Miss Phipps, sinking back as the deep note again rang through the air. "What a fool I am! What a noodle! What a ninny! Of course we are in Starminster, and Starminster is true to its name. Starminster has a cathedral."

"Yes, Starminster is a show place," said Tarrant, not without pride. "You should see the tourists here, on a summer afternoon."

"And a close, and gaiters, and a bishop, and a dean," continued Miss Phipps feverishly. "The Misses Harmonds' father was the Dean of Starminster Cathedral!"

"We told you so," said Tarrant.

"Oh, no, you didn't!" snapped Miss Phipps. "You said they were the daughters of *a* Dean. That,"

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said Miss Phipps crossly, "is not the same at all." She jerked her fur into place. "Come along," she said. "There's no need for us to stay here any longer."

She stalked away — not out of the door, to her companions' surprise, but towards the little counter, where Miss Jessica Harmond, with her gentle melancholy smile, was selling a box of chocolates to a gentleman with a clerical collar. Miss Phipps positively pushed herself into the middle of the transaction. Her pink face was now wreathed in smiles, her voice at its blandest; for the first time since Mary had known her, Miss Phipps appeared The Literary Celebrity.

"Forgive me, Miss Harmond," she said, in a tone so firm and authoritative that the others in the little room fell silent, and Miss Phipps's words competed only with the booming of the bell: "Forgive me for interrupting you, but I am obliged to leave Starminster at once for another engagement, and I could not do so without communicating to you the results of my investigation. My advice to you — and I wish to express it in the strongest possible terms — is to leave the Watch House immediately. No nerves, however strong, could endure what you have had to suffer during the past few months, without being shaken. My friend, Inspector Tarrant, is fully aware," boomed Miss Phipps firmly, "of all the various factors involved, and you need dread no repetition of the trouble. But I fear the reaction for you after this great strain; my advice is — and I give it as one not without experience in these matters — that you and your sister should leave the Watch House as soon as the matter can be arranged."

"We are deeply grateful to you, Miss Phipps," quivered Miss Harmond.

"Grateful indeed, Miss Phipps," quavered the other Miss Harmond.

A composite gesture, which referred either to the shaking of hands or to the waving aside of Tarrant's bill, or both, was sketched by the sisters; then the Tarrants found themselves trailing after Miss Phipps into the noonday sunshine.

"Let us go out into the country," said Miss Phipps in a tone of command.

In silence Tarrant led the way to the car park. Still in silence he helped Miss Phipps to be seated. Still in silence he negotiated the narrow streets of Starminster, and, passing beneath the west front of the fine white cathedral, sped along the Brittlesea road. It was not a meek silence, however, for when he presently drew up beside a grassy verge and turned to Miss Phipps, his face was hot.

"Perhaps, Miss Phipps, you will now explain the amazing statements you made to Miss Harmond," he said stiffly.

"No, my dear boy," replied Miss Phipps, beaming, "I won't do that. I'll explain the whole case to you,

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and you shall explain my remarks yourself."

"Explain the whole case?" cried Tarrant, while Mary said, "Quiet, Bob."

"Yes. Here we have," began Miss Phipps, "a series of outrages, senseless or sensible, purposeless or purposeful. If senseless and illogical, then nothing can be deduced from them, and it is useless to waste time in ratiocination. Let us lay aside that hypothesis, then, not as disproved but to await psychical confirmation, and proceed on the assumption that the other is correct. If the outrages were purposeful, what was their motive? To inflict loss on the Misses Harmond? But, in fact, very little damage was done; for, as the outrages always took place between night and morning, first, there was no money in the till, and second, the cakes, buns, milk, and so on, that were damaged were always stale. And these outrages always took place after a fine day — that is, after a *busy* day, a day when the stock left on the counters was small, and the resulting pecuniary damage also small. We observe, therefore, the curious fact that the outrages did not inflict as much harm as they appeared to inflict. . . . Next, let us consider the behavior of the Misses Harmond. Did they summon the police?"

"Yes," said Mary.

"No," said Miss Phipps. "Why didn't they simply telephone to the police station, the first or second time the damage occurred?"

"They dreaded the publicity," said Mary.

"But they did tell all their Starminster friends," objected Miss Phipps. "And they deliberately approached you, known to be the wife of a detective-inspector, and told you the story and enlisted your sympathy. Yet your own clear judgment told you, Mary, that you are not the type to whom the Misses Harmond would easily turn. The inference can only be that they desired unofficial but not official interference by the police. Why?"

"They didn't wish to press a charge, to be forced to take the case to court," said Tarrant shrewdly.

"Exactly," said Miss Phipps. "And why not? One explanation of their reluctance to prosecute is that they guessed the identity of the culprit. When you add to that the bolted doors, the small windows, those small-paned windows through which nothing can be seen from outside, and the interesting fact that no outrage ever occurred when a plainclothes policeman was posted in the café, then the identity of the culprit stares you in the face."

"Does it?" said Tarrant dryly.

"You mean it was a person hiding inside the building?" said Mary.

"I mean," said Miss Phipps, "that the poltergeist could easily be one of the Misses Harmond. The disorder could well have been arranged at night, before they bicycled home."

The Tarrants stared at her, too astonished to speak.

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"I was fairly certain of that much," continued Miss Phipps, "even before I entered the café. The question which puzzled me was —"

"Why should they do it?" cried Mary.

"Exactly," said Miss Phipps. "But Miss Harmond herself set me on the right track. She told me twice in two minutes that if the outrages persisted, she and her sister would be obliged to leave the Watch House. But since the outrages were not serious enough to injure, but only to irritate, and since the Misses Harmond did not take prompt and strong measures to suppress them, and since they were in fact probably responsible for them, it seemed clear that the outrages were designed as an *excuse for leaving* the café. Why did they wish to leave the café? The answer to that question was provided by the most fortunate presence of the manager of Quanders, and Mary's remark that she had often seen him there. Miss Harmond wished to leave the café because she had the chance of selling it to Quanders at a good price. But why strive to conceal a wish so natural, so legitimate? That was what I could not understand — when suddenly the booming of the cathedral bell made it all clear to me."

"The booming of the bell?" said Tarrant, aghast.

"Yes. For it revealed to me the Spirit of the Place. I do not blame myself at all now," said Miss Phipps cheerfully, "for being unable to elucidate this problem in London, from your report alone, my dear boy; for your report left out Starminster, and an essential factor in the problem is the Spirit of Starminster. Imagine to yourselves, my dear children," urged Miss Phipps in a graver tone, "a woman brought up in the shelter of a cathedral close, in the seventies of the last century. To such a woman, to be ladylike is the eleventh commandment, to be vulgar the eighth and deadliest sin. Now, as Mary had already, with her acute observation, perceived, and told me, Miss Harmond regarded Quanders as essentially vulgar, all the more so because its vulgarity is rich, luxurious, successful. And then along comes Quanders, offering a good sum, which means peace and security to two tired old ladies. But the price of this security is the admission, into sacred Starminster, into the ancient Watch House itself (that very stronghold of refinement!), of vulgarity — Vulgarity with a huge glittering V. Quanders would put up a neon sign and hold mannequin parades! And Miss Harmond would be the traitor who let this vulgarity in. Miss Harmond, daughter of the late Dean, surrounded by her friends, must either refuse to sell to Quanders, or live the rest of her life among friends who know that she has sold the fort — sold out, as Americans would say. And so, poor tired lady, she planned to be *driven* into selling to Quanders. 'Poor dear Miss Harmond,' the gossip will go; 'such a tragedy, she was *forced* by some

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vulgar malicious person to give up her café to those *horrible* Quanders. My dear, it was too terrible for her, but what *could* the poor thing do? Sabotage, you know!' So Miss Harmond would be a martyr, not a traitor. So she wanted the damage to be known, talked about, taken seriously, but not, of course, to be taken into court."

"So that was why you urged them to leave the Watch House at once?" said Tarrant, starting the engine.

"Yes. The relief in those poor things' eyes as I advised them publicly to do just what they are longing to do! It was pathetic," said Miss Phipps. "Though not unpleasant in a way, because it proved that I was right."

"I can't understand such behavior, all the same," said Mary, filled with scorn.

"The Spirit of the Place," said Miss Phipps soberly. "One is moulded by it. I shall make my heroine refuse the hero in an antique shop — and accept him," she added joyously as Tarrant put his foot on the accelerator, "in a car."

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FOOLS FOR LUCK;
or, The Price of a Seegar

by PETER B. KYNE

ALL THIS HAPPENED A LONG TIME ago, in Big Smoky Valley, which is a sizable desert in Nevada. Here we find Long Shorty Ferguson and his partner, Daniel Packard, encamped at Weeping Water, in the heart of Big Smoky. Mr. Ferguson, known as Long Shorty, to distinguish him from another Ferguson known as Shorty but who lacked the height of Long Shorty, was on duty as cook; Mr. Packard, who would have to do the cooking next week, lay in his blankets and snored with a faint whistling sound. The sun, creeping up over the Toquina range, was reaching in under the weeping willows which some forgotten Samaritan had planted at the water hole in the long ago; presently the light would fall on Mr. Packard's whiskery countenance and awaken him.

Long Shorty, as he turned the strips of bacon, keened softly *White wings, they never grow weary.* He was in a contented mood because at dawn a dozen sage hens had flown over to Weeping Water for their matutinal drink and Mr. Ferguson had killed two of them with a muzzle-loading shotgun. Consequently he looked forward to an excellent supper. He was

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trying to decide whether he would fry the sage hens or have them fricasseed, with gravy and dumplings, when Sweet Marie, one of the six desert donkeys owned by Dan Packard and himself, came up to the fire, as was her wont, in the expectancy that Long Shorty Ferguson would present her with a flapjack, as was his wont. She stood across the fire from Mr. Ferguson and thrust out her head and eyed him expectantly; she muttered softly an appeal to Long Shorty's finer instincts.

"You danged old mendicant, you," Mr. Ferguson murmured, kindly as always, and lifted a flapjack off the pile he had recently cooked. In the act of reaching for it, Sweet Marie appeared to lose interest in the tidbit; instead she raised her head and sniffed loudly; her long ears came forward and she gazed, with interest, out across Big Smoky. Presently she brayed.

Mr. Packard sat up, like an ancient Jack-in-the-Box, and demanded fiercely and vulgarly of Mr. Ferguson that the latter explain his neglect to control the warblings of Sweet Marie. He said he was dead for sleep and to have a danged jackass wake him up —

"You've slept ten hours, you vag," Long Shorty snarled back. "Sweet Marie sees somethin'. Git up off'n your dead tail, take them binoculars an' see what's moving off yonder in the sage."

Mr. Packard emerged in his underclothes, yawned, went to a kyack and procured the binoculars. Then he climbed aboard Sweet Marie, stood up on her rump, and scanned the wide, hot, misty vistas of Big Smoky.

"Pilgrim headed for Weepin' Water," he announced presently, "but he ain't a-goin' to git here under his own power. He was staggerin' when I see him first an' now he's fallen an' don't seem to be in no hurry to git up. Thirsty man fixin' to die a mile from water."

"Wash the sleepers out o' your eyes an' dress yourself," Long Shorty commanded. "The feller won't die for hours yet, so we got time to eat our breakfast which is ready an' then go after him. If he wasn't a doggoned tenderfoot he wouldn't be in the fix he's in, an' a little wait mebbe teaches him a lesson. However —"

He reached for the shotgun, which he had reloaded and leaned against the bole of a weeping willow tree, and fired both barrels into the air, with a noticeable pause between shots. In about 30 seconds the two old prospectors heard the distant report of a pistol shot out in the desert. So Long Shorty loosed six shots in the air from his old .45 — and the man out in the desert answered with five in rapid succession.

"We've talked," Long Shorty declared, "an' now, if the feller has any sense, he'll set quiet until we get there an' find him."

They ate calmly, unhurriedly, and when they finished Long Shorty saddled Sweet Marie, filled a canteen and hung it on the pommel. From his war bag Dan Packard produced a

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small flask of whiskey, which he had been saving for the celebration of Long Shorty's sixty-first birthday. Leading Sweet Marie they pushed out into Big Smoky. Of course Dan had taken bearings on the thirsty man's position and went to him as directly as a bird dog goes to a dead quail.

The victim of the desert was lying face down, with his head pillowed on his arms. Messrs. Ferguson and Packard looked at him once, swiftly, and then exchanged glances. Thirty years of wandering together in the waste had given them a vast respect for silence; long since they had discovered that words were not necessary for communication between them; telepathy had taken their place, except at dawn, when they spoke because they had nothing worthwhile to discuss and a new day always made them happy. Their glances now said very audibly:

"Mining engineer. Look at his nice flannel shirt! Look at his pigskin leggin's an' his ridin' pants. Look at his hat like a forest ranger's. Look at his double-action revolver an' it a .38! No wonder the fool got lost!"

Sadly each waggled his silvery head to the other in condemnation; then Long Shorty turned the young man over, lifted him to a sitting position, and blasphemously commanded him to open his mouth. The man obeyed, but did not open his eyes.

"Reminds me of a fledglin' gapin' for a worm," Mr. Packard growled as he thrust the muzzle of the canteen into that open mouth and poured. Then he withdrew the canteen to pour a gill of the cool water down the man's breast and another down his spine. Then, because the latter's mouth still hung open, Mr. Packard thrust the neck of his small whiskey flask in and again poured. Gasps and chokings rewarded him; instantly, Mr. Packard was mellow and sympathetic.

"Good whiskey claws all the way down, young feller," he declared.

His victim swept the flask aside. "I thought it was cyanide," he gasped. "Give me more water."

"In about five minutes, you danged ingrate."

Dan and Long Shorty lifted the man up into the saddle; Long Shorty stuck the pilgrim's gun back into the holster and gave Sweet Marie a gentle kick in the belly, which had the effect of heading the intelligent little animal back to the camp at Weeping Water. Messrs. Ferguson and Packard walked beside her and held their victim on. Arrived at Weeping Water the pilgrim was given another drink of water and then a cup of strong black coffee with three fingers of Dan Packard's terrible whiskey in it. While he drank, Long Shorty wiped the sand out of the rheumy, inflamed eyes with a wet towel; later they undressed him and threw buckets of water over him and in about an hour they gave him breakfast, after which he crawled into Dan Packard's bed and fell asleep. The two desert rats looked down at him; they shook their heads

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in affirmation of the mutual realization that they were stuck at Weeping Water for at least three days until their guest would be strong enough to travel again and, hence, it would be smart of them to take things easy in the interim. Silently Mr. Ferguson gave Mr. Packard a blanket and a quilt for himself. Each lay down; each lighted a pipe and smoked. Eventually Mr. Packard murmured:

"Long Shorty, it beats hell, don't it?"

"It does," Mr. Ferguson replied, "but is that any reason why you got to be such a damned old chatterbox?"

"Some day," Mr. Packard promised darkly, "you'll go too far, Long Shorty."

"You pick on me with your dodgasted promises," Mr. Ferguson complained. "You excite me with your confidence-man habit o' paintin' pictures with bright colors, until, agin my better jedgement, I foller you out here into the heart o' Tophet on a placer minin' expedition. I knew we'd have adventures — an' so we have. Here we are, stuck with another mouth to feed, with grub none too plentiful, an' no money to buy more if we survive long enough to git to a place where they sell it."

"I don't particularly recall you makin' objections to the enterprise, Long Shorty." The mildness of the remark was infuriating.

Long Shorty sprang to his feet. "Call me a liar, why don't you?" he shrilled, and his hand fell to the butt of his holstered gun, to be ready to avenge the insult in blood, should Dan Packard have the hardihood to bolster up his hint by a definite charge of falsehood.

"All right," Mr. Packard murmured lazily, "you're a liar."

Long Shorty sat down dejectedly. "A man can't kill his own pardner," he excused his lack of follow-through-with-ferocity, and leaned his head in both hands. Just then Sweet Marie brayed. Mr. Packard instantly hurled a rock at the jackass, striking her in the ribs. "That'll learn you not to laugh at my pardner," he yelled severely. "The laughin' concession in this aged imbee-cile is entirely mine by virtue o' squatter's right."

"If this talk keeps up, Dan'l," Mr. Ferguson warned solemnly, "I'm goin' to git myself a new pardner. You're noisier'n a parrot. I declare, I don't know what's got into you today, Dan'l."

"I ain't promisin' to act deef an' dumb, Long Shorty, so when you head out lookin' for a new pardner, you leave them overalls you're wearin' behind you. I s'pose you figger I'm such a fool I fail to recognize my Sunday pants, eh? Jest because you ain't careful with your clothes an' wear 'em out in jig time ain't no reason why I got to stand for you walkin' off with my wardrobe."

"So you'd set me adrift in my shirt tail, eh?"

"Shet up. You're on a mental par with a field mouse."

"An' if your brains, Dan'l, was solid refined gold in one lump, a

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tarantula could tote 'em over the Sierra an' back without perspirin'. Dan'l, before it's too late, will you leave this sand an' sage an' go over into the Toquinas, into them nice cool hills among the timber, where we stand a chance o' runnin' on to a big wide ledge o' nice rich free-millin' ore that starts at the grass roots an' runs clear down to China. Me, I'm a hard-rock man. I never could work up a circulation over placer ground, unless it run twenty dollars a yard on bedrock an' no fightin' over the water to sluice it."

For a moment, Mr. Packard was tempted to continue the senseless quarrel, because quarreling was the only enjoyment he and Long Shorty ever had, except when they went to town to get drunk. However, he had talked himself out; he felt weak after so much language and he knew from experience that Long Shorty would welcome an armistice. And Daniel believe he had won the quarrel. That dig about the overalls had been an inspiration; indeed, on second thought, Daniel wondered if he hadn't overplayed his hand a little and hurt Long Shorty's feelings. So he turned his head and was certain of it — for Long Shorty was drawing off the overalls!

"Very well, Long Shorty, rather than quarrel with you an' hurt your feelin's, which the same are as tender as a widder woman's, I'll go over into the Toquinas with you," he soothed. "After we've starved to death a couple times you'll be bellyachin' to go down into Big Smoky long enough to dry-wash a road stake. Now, lemme alone. I got some sleep to catch up on."

He rolled over and closed his eyes . . . presently he heard Long Shorty singing:

White wings, they never grow weary,
They carry me swiftly over the sea.
Night comes, I long for my dearie,
I'll spread out my white wings and
sail home to thee.

The day had started auspiciously. Each combatant believed he had been victorious, and there would be no more talking until sunset tinged the waste again with glory, hiding its harshness in a soft amethyst loveliness; for the sunsets, like the dawns, always made Long Shorty and Dan happy, thus inspiring a word or two of personal abuse.

When the sage hen fricassee with dumplings was ready, Long Shorty emitted a scream, because in no other way could he express his contentment with the world as at that moment constituted. The pilgrim sat up, blinking. "Who," he demanded, "is killing whom?"

"I'm killin' you, young feller," Mr. Packard promised, "if you don't wash the sleepers out o' them bloodshot orbs o' yourn an' tie into this here sage hen my pardner's prepared. Sage hen's Long Shorty's premier dish, an' in thirty years I've never seen him make the mistake, when a sage hen rises, o' downin' an old cock. No, sir-ee. Long Shorty never

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fails to get him a yearlin', which the taste o' sage ain't so pronounced in a yearlin'." For no reason at all Mr. Packard had decided to be magnanimous.

"It'd be pronounced enough, you dotard," said Long Shorty, "if you was doin' the cookin'. Me, I soak the bird all day in salt water an' saleratus."

The pilgrim sat in the blankets and appraised the two old desert rats. "So it isn't a dream after all," he murmured. "Gentlemen, permit me to introduce myself. I'm Earle Jarlath Stinson."

"We knew it'd be either Earle or Percival," said Mr. Packard. "Your clothes informed us you're a minin' engineer. At least, you got a sheepskin back home that says so, but me an' Long Shorty know better. You're so young an' innercent an' fight good whiskey so hard we know you ain't yet took your postgraduate course with a muck-stick in a wet mine. I'm Dan Packard an' this here sage hen artist is my pardner, Long Shorty Ferguson. We hope you ain't a gaseous young feller, because me an' Long Shorty is men of few words. We figger silence is golden because it don't disturb valuable thoughts."

The young man stepped to the water hole, washed his face, and ran his fingers through his hair. Long Shorty handed him a plate brimming with sage hen, dumplings, and white gravy, and Earle Jarlath Stinson sat down and ate in silence. Indeed, so uncommunicative was he that presently Mr. Packard demanded:

"Cat git your tongue?"

"Or are your feelin's hurt?" Long Shorty countered. "Ain't you goin' to tell us how come we find you projectin' around half dead with thirst an' delirious out yonder in the sage."

"I have not, hitherto, been asked to explain my presence here, gentlemen. I assumed, therefore, it was not a matter of interest to you."

"Oh, hell," Daniel growled, "me an' Long Shorty's curiouser'n a couple o' she-antelope."

"I thought you wanted me to respect your yearning for silence —"

"You'll speak in this camp, young feller, when you're spoken to," Long Shorty warned. And added in hurt tones, "You never even praised my dumplin's."

"Ain't you got no manners?" Daniel demanded, quick to dash to his partner's defense. "I suppose grub like that's just commonplace to the heir to the Stinson millions."

The young man merely smiled at the contrary pair.

"This your first trip into the desert?" pursued Dan.

"Yes."

"Thought so. Were you alone?"

"Yes."

"You're an ee-diot. How come you lose your jacks?"

"A hungry she-panther took a fancy to them and, with her three last-year's cubs, commenced stalking us. The jacks stampeded. By the

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time I'd dispersed the panthers they were out of sight in some swales. I couldn't catch up with them, although I trailed them all day. I dried up, of course; after sunset I headed this way, in the cool. I'd seen these weeping willows from a great distance and they spelled water to me. I couldn't quite make the grade."

"A feller named Earle *would* be a chap to put all his water on the jacks!"

From afar came a faint hee-haw. "Here come your jacks now, Earle," Long Shorty informed him. "They smell the water."

Presently two burros came charging through the sage and slid down to the water hole. Long Shorty grabbed one and Dan the other; the parched animals were permitted to drink sparingly at first and were then tied to a tree. When, in the course of an hour, they had been watered slightly three times, the old prospectors removed their packs and turned both burros loose. "Which if you let a jack crazy with thirst drink his fill at first, you lose him pronto, Earle," Dan informed the pilgrim, who was duly impressed by this valuable information and gave thanks politely.

Dan and Long Shorty noted with pleasure that ten hours of sleep and plenty of water had quite restored the young man's strength. He had eaten with noticeable relish, finished his ration before the partners had finished theirs, and interrupted Long Shorty's mastication to ask for more. After his donkeys arrived he went to one of the kyacks and then sat down by the fire and blew smoke rings, while Daniel washed the dishes and buried the coffee grounds and sage hen bones.

The following night after supper, Dan and Long Shorty packed the pilgrim's jacks and Dan gave him a rough sketch of the route to Tonopah and information respecting the water holes he would meet thereon. He bade them a cheerful farewell, after first insulting them by asking them how much he owed them, and pushed off into Big Smoky when the moon came up.

The partners watched him until he disappeared from sight, then, each acting under a telepathic command, they dashed out into the sage and drove in their burros, packed them, filled the water kegs, and headed out across Big Smoky toward the distant Toquina range. They had traveled about two hours before Long Shorty broke the silence:

"All that Earle person owed us," he mused, "was his life, a kindly welcome, an' a helpin' hand — an' he forgot to mention it. Figured we'd be satisfied if he give us a couple o' dollars each."

"An' mysterious as hell," said Dan. "Not a peep out o' him as to where he'd been or where's he struck that highgrade. Graduate o' one of them eastern school o' mines, I reckon. If he'd been brought up west o' the Rocky mountains he'd have let us in on the Big Strike for what we done for him. Likes waitin' on, don't

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he? Well, I reckon we got to learn him etticat as practised in these parts."

At dawn they made a dry camp about five miles from the foothills of the Toquinas and, after hobbling the jacks, slept until noon. They awakened to find themselves just off the edge of a sandstorm.

"The fool's lucky," Long Shorty growled. "We come up to the Toquinas five miles south o' where this pilgrim probably come out o' them, figurin' to travel north until we cut his trail an' backtrack it — an' now that sandstorm blots it out. Dan'l, we got to rely on instinct."

About 3 o'clock the sandstorm subsided and they resumed their trek. As they approach the foothills Mr. Ferguson got out the binoculars and studied the country to the north. Silently he handed the glasses to Mr. Packard who made an equally long appraisal, and nodded. Two hours later they turned at right angles and entered the mouth of a cañon, the floor of which was a boulder-strewn wash, due to cloudbursts that had roared down it in the past.

Presently Long Shorty pointed down and Dan saw the hoofprints of two shod burros and the footprints of a man. "Instinct, based on a hint fellers like you an' me can understand, is a wonderful thing," Mr. Packard opined. "That Earle ingrate didn't say nothin' — an' yet he spoke volumes."

They followed the hoofprints up the wash until they left it for a side cañon, the floor of which was covered with tall dry grass in which the trail still showed plainly. They followed the trail for three miles and came at last to a big spring that bubbled out of the earth and flowed down the cañon. The grass was green and the jacks brayed with delight at sight of it. Dan and Long Shorty promptly unpacked and made camp in a cottonwood grove hard by.

Mr. Packard scouted around and picked up an empty sardine tin, and empty tomato can, and a couple of bones. "Earle camped here," he announced merely by holding these exhibits up for his partner's inspection.

In the morning they set forth in search of the rich claim they knew Earle Jarlath Stinson had staked. They were nearly all day finding it about a quarter of a mile from the spring. It took in a long, low hogsback that gradually tilted upward; outcroppings of the vein showed here and there on the surface. They found where Earle Jarlath Stinson had dug a hole about six feet deep and four feet wide, exposing the vein. The old prospectors chipped samples from the face of the ledge and returned to their camp in the cottonwoods, where they broke up their ore samples, horned them out, and weighed the gold.

"She runs about two hundred dollars a ton," Long Shorty announced. "Looks like Earle stumbled onto a pocket."

In the morning they went back

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and located the little rock monuments the tenderfoot engineer had erected to mark the boundaries of his claim. Strangely, he had located but one claim. Dan and Long Shorty broke down one monument and found a tin cylinder cached in it. Inside the cylinder was Earle's location notice. They read it carefully and discovered it was in good order. So they spent the next ten days locating claims for themselves and friends. Earle had called his claim Discovery Claim; just below it and right on the lode Mr. Packard located for himself the Early Bird claim. Just above Discovery, Mr. Ferguson located the Silly Tenderfoot claim. Then they killed two deer and jerked the meat. Mr. Packard took all the jacks and, with two kegs of water, a little flour, salt, coffee, and jerked venison, headed out across Big Smoky for Round Mountain, where he risked the last $20 he and Long Shorty had in a poker game. He won $150 before dawn, paid all his filing fees, loaded his jacks with food, and trudged back to Long Shorty, whom he found subsisting on a diet of grouse and venison.

During the next 30 days they did the assessment work on their claims and exposed a ledge of very rich free-milling ore sixteen feet wide. They talked little but they trembled with the gold fever. They were millionaires without the price of a drink between them! Thereafter they staked everything within a square mile of Discovery, for Long Shorty and Dan had a very simple method of hogging ground legally. They traveled with dozens of powers of attorney from distant and disinterested friends, and these powers of attorney authorized them to locate mining claims for the signers. The claims located and the one hundred dollars' worth of assessment work necessary to preserve title for one year having been performed, these friends would, upon the receipt of one dollar and a prepared deed, obligingly sell their claims to Dan and Long Shorty. This was an old mining wrinkle apparently unknown to Earle Jarlath Stinson; Dan and Long Shorty believed the young man must have a singularly one-track mind and a non-elastic conscience; otherwise, even though he held no power of attorney from distant and disinterested friends to stake mining claims for them, he would have filed all over the place anyhow on the off chance that mere fake location notices would keep trespassers off.

When Dan and Long Shorty looked at the hole Earle had dug on his claim, they realized he had delved there about two days. "No hundred dollars worth of assessment work done there," they decided, "an' if he files an affidavit of assessment work performed he perjures himself, an' we'd fight him."

Somehow, they both believed Earle Jarlath Stinson was not the sort to perjure himself. So they decided to play fair with Earle. They waited four days after the expiration of the

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legal 30 days in which a locator can hold title before performing his assessment work, and then staked Earle's Discovery claim in the name of a friend; and then, without destroying his monuments or removing his tin cylinders from the heart of them, they set up monuments of their own.

By the fifteenth of December they had completed the assessment work on all of the claims staked for their "friends"; they could expect snow any day now, so they packed the last remnant of their grub and returned to Round Mountain, where they got a job with the Round Mountain Placer Mining Company. During the winter they filed their affidavits of assessment work, had deeds prepared, and received these deeds, duly signed, from the men in whose names they had located claims.

Now, the country in which Dan and Long Shorty had operated was surveyed, although it lay in the public domain. So they had hunted around until they found section posts; thus they had been enabled to secure a legal description of a half section in the valley below the Discovery strike. So in the spring they journeyed down to the General Land Office in Reno and each filed a homestead on a quarter section; Dan's quarter section included a nice damsite in a narrow cañon and Long Shorty's included the big spring. Then they went over to Tonopah and Dan showed samples of their ore, together with assay certificates, and, in return for a truck load of building lumber and a six months' supply of grub delivered at the scene of their strike, they let one man in on the secret. Long Shorty, operating independently, let another man in on the secret for a thousand dollars and transportation to the Big Strike. Whereupon one of the favored two got drunk and talked — and a hundred men in automobiles trailed them across Big Smoky and into the new strike.

No news spreads so fast as that of a new rich gold strike, and, almost overnight, Toquina City was born. Dan and Long Shorty built a shack, with a kitchen and bedroom in back and an office in front. On the roof they erected a crude sign that informed the world that here was the office of the Packard-Ferguson Addition to Toquina City and the Toquina City Water Works. A young woman who arrived early in the rush, with a typewriter, a supply of paper, and a commission as notary public, was engaged to take charge of Dan's and Long Shorty's municipal enterprises. The pair had already sold five claims for five thousand each — claims which both felt assured were absolutely non-mineralized. But that mattered not to the purchasers — fly-by-night, crooked promoters — who had to have some sort of property in Toquina City in order to sell their stock to suckers in distant cities. With the funds thus obtained, Dan and Long Shorty engaged a surveyor to lay out their townsite and a well-driller with his crew to sink a well

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on the site of the spring. At 200 feet they got 2000 gallons per minute, which they pumped into a huge concrete reservoir.

They had the only water and the only flat land in the district and they did not overcharge for either. They leased town lots with an option to buy, if and when they should receive a patent from the General Land Office. They hired a prominent lawyer in Reno to come up and organize their business; they incorporated the Toquina Hills Gold Mining Company, and, on the reports of an eminent firm of mining engineers, plus the assay reports, the stock went on the San Francisco Mining Exchange at par of $1 per share. It was gobbled up in a week; then, because there was no more stock for sale, a brisk trading among stockholders commenced and the stock shot up twenty points — whereupon Dan and Long Shorty went into a huddle.

"Dan'l," Mr. Ferguson announced, "we can unload our controllin' interest in the Toquina Hills Gold Minin' Company for a million each. We can unload our water company an' our townsite for two hundred thousand an' I reckon we're due to clean up another hundred thousand from all them worthless promoters that expects to unload country rock on the strength o' the showin' in Toquina Hills." He eyed his partner keenly and, of course, Mr. Packard caught the message.

"Yes, Long Shorty," Dan replied, "you're right, as usual. Me an' you is past sixty. Twice before we been minin' camp millionaires an' all we had to remember it by, when the smoke cleared away, was a bad case o' indigestion. Nobody ever went broke takin' a profit; me an' you ain't got no heirs, we don't expect to live forever, so we might as well live in a house for the years that lie before us. In sellin' now we're probably throwin' away ten million each. But who gives a damn. Live an' let live is our motter. You had an offer?"

Long Shorty nodded.

"Who?"

"Syndicate represented by a young minin' engineer. Feller name o' Earle Jarlath Stinson. He claims to have Wall Street capital behind him."

"Just for that the control'll cost him a million extry," Mr. Packard declared viciously. "An' he'll act quick. Yes, sir-ee! Put up or shet up. I ain't inclined to temporize none with Earle Jarlath."

Evidently Earle Jarlath was a fast trader, for within a week he and Long Shorty and Dan sat down in front of a certified check and a heap of stock certificates laboriously endorsed by Messrs. Ferguson and Packard. And when Earle Jarlath Stinson had counted and taken possession of the stock representing the control of the Toquina Hills Gold Mining Company, and Dan and Long Shorty had pocketed the certified check, Earle Jarlath glanced coldly at the aged pair and said:

"You two have been fools for luck.

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I located this ground first and —"

"An' your grub give out before you could do your assessment work," Mr. Ferguson interrupted. "You took a chance on goin' out to register your claim, loadin' up with grub, an' comin' back with men to do the assessment work. Before you'd gotten to the District Recorder in Tonopah we was here, an' it weren't no luck, less'n you call it lucky to be smart enough to know which way is up. We waited until your claim was legally open to be filed on agin', then we filed on it in the name of a friend who'd give us his power of attorney. I reckon your lawyers found everything all legal about our title or you'd never have bought us out."

"You're right. My grub did give out. How did you guess that?"

"Didn't have to guess it. We knew. If your grub hadn't give out we'd have found a lot more garbage around the spring where you camped!"

"You came directly from Weeping Water here?" Earle Jarlath queried, amazed.

"Startin' fifteen minutes after you left us, headed for Tonopah. You was in a hell-fired hurry to git to the District Recorder. We could have directed you to one fifty mile closer, but you didn't ask us. Besides, knowin' you'd struck it rich over in the Toquinas an' wishful to git in on the good thing before the stampede started, it wouldn't have been policy for us to ask questions or hand out advice about the nearest District Recorder."

"How did you know I'd struck it rich?"

"Fools is lucky, Earle, an' you was plenty foolish, a tenderfoot o' the first water," Long Shorty replied acidly. "When your jacks come stampedin' to Weepin' Water you was too far gone with thirst yourself to look after 'em, so we did it for you. When I remove the packs I find two kyacks on your gray burro so heavy I know they don't contain grub. I would have suspected they contained ore samples, but there was too many samples for that, an' for the amount they was grossly overweight. I couldn't help looking into the kyacks an' seein' a lot o' canvas bags with the mouths tied with copper wire. So I says: 'Hello, our Earle has found a pocket. Just enough quartz to hold the metal together. I didn't investigate no further because I didn't have to. I knew. Besides, you was our guest an' if there's a man on earth that wants killin' it's the host that gits curious about his guest."

"Right," Mr. Packard chimed in. "Long Shorty didn't say nothin' to me, but I noticed he let me pack that gray burro when you was movin' out from under our hospitality — an' I got the same reaction from them two heavy kyacks that he did. So we come to a quick mutual decision to get to hell out o' Weepin' Water immediately if not sooner. While I was packin' up our bedrolls preparatory to loadin' same on Sweet Marie I found this," and Dan tossed over

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to the engineer a red-leather loose-leaf memorandum book. "You'd left that in the blankets where you'd slept. Must have dropped out of your pocket. You was too far away by that time for me to run after you an' hand you back the book, so I figgered to give it to you when we met later, over in the Toquinas."

"Damnation!" Earle Jarlath Stinson burst out. "The loss of that memorandum book cost me millions!"

"Me an' Long Shorty had a sort o' sneakin' idee it would," Dan went on placidly. "Glancin' through it we see where you've drawn a panoramic sketch o' the Toquinas after you leave the foothills an' git out into Big Smoky. We see where you've marked the pass you come out of an' a cluster of pine trees on a shoulder o' the hill on the south side o' the pass. Them was the only trees for ten miles in either direction." Mr. Packard blew his nose and sighed deeply, for all this conversation was well nigh killing him. "Me an' Long Shorty took two days off to go down to that there tuft o' tree an' cut 'em down. There's a hell-anointed sameness to all them hills an' buttes after you leave the desert, so we figgered that without your little panoramic sketch an' definite landmark mebbe you don't find your way back to the arena of your riches, as the poet says."

"You're right. I tried all summer and failed," Earle Jarlath admitted bitterly. "Of course, with my sketch to guide you, you two had no trouble."

"'Twern't that," Long Shorty piped up. "We was in here a week before we got curious an' looked in your doggone book. We followed your trail in."

"I don't believe that, Mr. Ferguson. I had an Indian trailer with me when I got back to Weeping Water. I wanted to trail you two and get back my memorandum book and that sketch. I followed your trail for twenty miles and then lost it. A sandstorm had wiped your trail out, so I know the storm wiped out the trail I made when I came out of the Toquinas."

"Take the head o' the class, mister," Long Shorty replied without animus. "We lost the trail you'd left in the sand but we picked up the one you'd left *in the air*."

"But I don't understand."

"You tell him, Dan," Long Shorty urged wearily. "It's your turn to talk anyhow."

"We knew you'd made a big strike, Earle," Mr. Packard resumed the tale wearily. "But as you was mighty danged close-mouthed, you don't let us in on the glad tidin's, which you might have done if you'd been real thoughtful, seein' as how we'd saved your life. But we knew you'd made the strike in the Toquinas, although it was possible to make it on any o' them buttes that rise out o' Big Smoky. You told us a she-panther an' her three last-year cubs had stalked you an' your burros. What they was stalking was the foal that gray she-burro o' yourn had. I noticed

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that old jack had an udder full o' milk when she arrived at Weepin' Water, so I figgered one o' the panthers got the foal, after all. Panthers like a foal better'n deer an'll go far to git one. Of course we knew you'd never jump a panther in the desert, but we did know there's lots of deer in these timbered Toquina hills — an' wherever deer is plentiful you'll find panther. Skirtin' the western fringe o' the Toquinas, tryin' to pick up your trail where you come out o' the hills, we see half a dozen buzzards circlin' around. When buzzards circle above, there's always a carcass below. So we pushed over an' found the ol' she-panther you'd shot. She lay out in the sage, half a mile from the edge o' the hills. So we turned to the first cañon leadin' up into the hills — an' there, in the sand o' the wash, where the wind hadn't had a chance to disturb the tracks, we picked up your outbound trail an' backtracked on it."

"An' when we got to the spring an' camped an' found your garbage there," Long Shorty piped up, "we knew you'd been camped there recent, because only a tenderfoot'll leave his bones an' empty tin cans an' bread scraps around to attract flies an' varmints. A knowledgeable man buries his garbage."

Earle Jarlath said sadly, "I uncovered a Golconda and all I'll get out of it is a job as assistant manager and a little block of stock. It would have been far better had I taken you two wilderness detectives into my confidence when you picked me up at Weeping Water."

"Son," said Long Shorty plaintively, "I reckon 'taint all your fault. You ain't been raised right. Me an' Dan'l has roved for thirty years together, freezin' in blizzards an' burnin' in heat waves. We been thirsty an' we been hungry an' we been broke an' we been so rich we've had to work hard a couple years to git poor agin. I reckon, when we was young, mebbe we was a mite heedless an' selfish. But son, this country done somethin' to us. Because it ain't crowded we had room to grow. A country like this makes a feller big in sperrit — so he sort o' resents whatever's small. When me an' Dan'l haul you in off Big Smoky last summer you don't assay very high in life expectancy, as the insurance fellers say. But we pull you through — an' because you're young, you bound back like a rubber band. At dawn you're dyin'; at sunset you're askin' for seconds on the grub without waitin' to be invited. After supper you don't offer to help wash the dishes or bury the garbage or bring in some dry dead sage for the fire. Bein' young, you set there on your tail an' smoke a seegar an' watch two old men do the chores. Wuss'n that, you have a box o' seegars in your war bag, which you help yourself to one but don't offer none to me an' Dan'l. Not that we ever smoke seegars 'ceptin' we're in town an' wearin' our Sunday clothes . . ."

Long Shorty paused and with his

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eyes appealed to Dan Packard to complete the indictment. "Which, under other conditions," that worthy took up the tale, "we'd have figgered you a right nice boy, even if you was inhabitin' funny clothes. I reckon if you'd been perlite I'd have mounted up on Sweet Marie an' hurried after you an' give you back your little red book. We'd have felt that kindly toward you we'd have been sorry for your minin' ignorance an' we'd have done the assessment work on your claim an' filed an affidavit for you to that effect. Me an' Long Shorty pick up the band o' the seegar you smoke after you've left camp an' on account o' havin' been richer a couple times we recognize the brand, an' near come to blows later arguin' about whether that seegar retails for sixty cents or fifty. Of course even a two-bit seegar is probably wasted on us, but still we'd have been complimented if you'd made the offer. An' you left without sayin' thanks or to hell with you or what-all."

Earle Jarlath Stinson flushed deeply and bowed himself out, leaving Dan and Long Shorty to sit in silence for two hours and recover from their recent verbal debauch. Presently Dan Packard murmured:

"Long Shorty, don't it beat hell?"

Long Shorty bent upon Daniel a jaundiced eye. "It does," he agreed sourly, "but is that any reason why you got to be such a infernal chatterbox?"

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* published monthly at Concord, New Hampshire, for October 1, 1954.

1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publisher*, Joseph W. Ferman, 471 Park Avenue, New York 22; *Editor*, Ellery Queen, 471 Park Avenue, New York 22; *Managing Editor*, Robert P. Mills, 471 Park Avenue, New York 22. 2. The owners are: Mercury Publications, Inc., 471 Park Avenue, New York 22; Joseph W. Ferman, 471 Park Avenue, New York 22. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. (Signed) Joseph W. Ferman, *Publisher*. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 30th day of September, 1954. [Seal] Howard K. Pruyn, *Notary Public*. (My commission expires March 30, 1955.)

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

and **Black Mask** section

Thomas Millstead's "Two-Bit Gangster" is one of the thirteen "first stories" which won special awards in EQMM's Ninth Annual Contest — last year's competition. It is a tough story about a true-crime writer with a bad cold — and no illusions. The characters have surprising clarity for a first story, and despite the hardboiled sentimentality the underlying theme is as hard as nails . . . The author was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1929, and has lived almost his entire life in Racine, Wisconsin. He was graduated from Marquette University in Milwaukee, but he had hardly got out of school when he found himself in the Army. At the time he wrote "Two-Bit Gangster," Mr. Millstead was editing the post newspaper at Fort Eustis, Virginia; as a matter of fact, the story was written on an old Army typewriter, late at night, in the midst of a dark and quiet camp.

The author thinks his only claim to fame, so far in his career, is that he was cofounder of the Upper Berkeley Mews Haloes, a "rabid society dedicated to the study and perpetuation of Leslie Charteris's Simon Templar, the Saint. In its few years of feverish activity, the society recruited a small and rather motley group from around the globe who . . . nearly accomplished a complete cataloguing of every character in the Charteris books — which shows the extent of youthful adulation."

Another statement in the author's letter interested us hugely. Mr. Millstead has read every story in every issue of EQMM since 1944, and he said that it was EQMM that "first aroused an active desire in me to write, rather than just dream of doing so some day." This pleases us enormously — even more than if Mr. Millstead had cofounded an EQ fan club!

TWO-BIT GANGSTER

by THOMAS MILLSTEAD

OTTMAN DIDN'T LIKE THE ASSIGNment. He liked simple-souled criminals who were raging killers at heart and nothing more. Analyzing the motives and mores of a mad dog was not his cup of tea. He felt it was just so much wasted effort as far as the readers of *True Crime Detective*

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Monthly were concerned, and, anyway, it interfered with his novel.

The novel concerned a talented young man, knocked about by the world a bit, who worked for a pulp magazine, then wrote a best-selling novel, married a rich woman he didn't love, and viewed the passing parade with cynical amusement. Ottman figured the novel was a sure thing, since he was writing about things he knew first-hand. But this quick trip to Birch City, Wisconsin, had derailed his train of thought. (The novel was still in the planning stage.)

The crime itself, though, was a good one for his usual magazine treatment — a robbery, a murder, a police chase, and now a five-state dragnet — with only the usual number of loose ends peculiar to every real crime. He could do a slambang job on it that would have his readers glued to their seats. But the editor of *True Crime Detective Monthly* wouldn't have it that way.

The editor, Ottman told himself, was a maudlin old man with a morbid desire to look on the brighter side of life. It was a standard office joke that the editor's definition of a sadist was "one who gives a masochist pleasure." Twenty years of editing case histories on dope fiends and sex maniacs had not dimmed the editor's desire to find the inevitable goodness in mankind. And in the death of Victor Koback he thought he had found it in its natural state.

Koback, a life-long hoodlum, had unexpectedly, foolishly, gallantly thrown away his life in an attempt to protect an old woman and to thwart a bank robbery.

The editor, Ottman remembered, had clenched his paper-thin hands into fists and, eyes gleaming, declared: "There it is! It means a man is never inexorably chained to his past, however evil! It means that even a seemingly hopeless brute has a spark of decency which can never be extinguished! And it means that somewhere in his earlier life Koback manifested this essential goodness. Trace that vein of virtue in him and you will find that man is, after all, only a cut below the angels."

That was Ottman's job: tracking down that hidden vein of virtue; resurrecting the motives and behavior patterns of a gangster who died of gunshot wounds three weeks before.

Ottman sighed wheezily. He was still in the grip of spring flu. He still felt the dregs of this morning's hangover, the memorial to a vain attempt at arresting the cold germs early in the game. And now he faced another editor, Jesse Child of the Birch City *Weekly*.

Child was a lean, sharp-boned man who ran a debris-laden newspaper office while fastidiously dressed in an immaculate blue pin-stripe suit, starched white shirt, and a precisely centered hand-painted tie. His block of jet-black hair was supported by arches of graying sideburns. Thick black horn-rimmed glasses diluted the color of his steady eyes.

Child had gone into a back room

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and returned with the issues of his paper covering Koback's death. The *Weekly's* account was thorough—"The town's biggest story," Child had said, "since the city council claimed to have seen flying saucers over the courthouse."

Ottman jotted the essentials into his notebook. On a Tuesday three weeks before, a tall, blond, hatless man wearing a Halloween mask entered the Birch City Bank. He produced a pistol and marched the three customers and the bank teller to the manager's office. Confronting the manager, a Mr. Cudworth, he then forced all of them to the vault. He threatened to kill all five if the manager did not open the vault. The bank robber's voice quivered with tension and nervousness, and the manager complied. The masked man then threw him a satchel, which Cudworth filled with stacked bills. A later check revealed that it amounted to $22,000.

The thief grasped the satchel and ordered his prisoners back to the manager's office. The customers were an elderly widow, a farmer's wife, and Victor Koback. To prevent an immediate alarm, the masked man pulled the office telephone loose. This abrupt move caused the old lady to become hysterical and the thief raised his pistol as if to hit her.

Victor Koback leaped at him.

It was a good six-foot jump. Koback clawed at the thief's head, but was pushed away by the pistol butt.

Koback staggered back clutching a blond wig.

For a full moment he seemed to gape at the masked man's blazing thatch of red hair.

The thief then deliberately shot the man who had tried to be a hero.

Koback lurched backwards, one of his hands falling on the disconnected telephone receiver. He swung it by the cord at the masked man's head. The receiver found its target, but the thump of its contact was lost in the pistol's second explosion, the shot that shattered Koback's jaw.

Before Koback hit the floor, the thief had slammed the office door behind him. Koback was still grasping the blond wig in his left hand and the cord of the telephone receiver in his right. He died before reaching the hospital, without regaining consciousness.

The Halloween mask was found inside the bank's outer door. Another customer testified that as he was entering he saw a tall man leaving the bank, but he had paid no attention to the man's features.

Twenty minutes later, while the police were searching for the killer, an anonymous phone call reported that "Red Jack" Fisher was at the Birch City Hotel. Fisher, a stranger in town, was a Chicago gangster with no known connections in the area. Chief of Police Adam Brooks took a patrolman with him to the hotel.

He stationed the policeman outside and went in. Fisher had not registered under his own name, but the clerk said there was a thin, red-headed stranger in Room 214.

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The door was locked. Brooks pounded on it. A voice asked who it was.

The police, Brooks shouted.

A bullet splintered one of the door panels.

Brooks drew his revolver and sent two shots back into the room. Then he turned his gun on the lock.

The door collapsed on an empty room. He ran to the open window. A tall form picked itself up from the sidewalk below and began to run. Brooks fired his last shot and saw the man spin but keep going.

The patrolman came around the side of the hotel and snapped a shot at the red-headed gangster. Fisher slumped again but this time he returned the fire. The policeman toppled. He suffered a non-fatal scalp wound. Fisher lurched to a green Packard sedan. A small crowd was collecting. He forced the car through, but not before Brooks had a chance to see the license number.

The police blocked all the routes out of town. The car was found in a field next morning. No trace of Fisher was picked up. Police theorized that a confederate had carried him away in another car. By now every midwestern state was on the lookout for the killer.

Those were the bare facts related in the Birch City *Weekly*. Good facts too. Rich morsels for the followers of *True Crime Detective Monthly*. Just what they expected, just what they wanted. To probe deeper was to come up with things they did not really care to know. They were not interested in the mystery of the human heart, so why confront them with it?

Still Ottman had his orders. He was not free to slant the story as he wished. He found himself taking a perverse pleasure in this release from his usual responsibility.

But the question remained: Why the gallantry of Victor Koback?

The old woman? He had never seen her before. She was new in town, had lived all her life in Nebraska, a state never visited by Victor Koback.

The bank? Koback had no money in it. And only $87 on his person, which was never threatened.

The thief? Koback scarcely knew "Red Jack" Fisher. If he did recognize him beneath the blond wig and the mask, he knew the man was ruthless and wisely let alone.

Where then was the weed-choked well from whence had spurted this sudden courage? Where? Ottman's right hand doodled nervous caricatures in his open notebook.

He turned on Jesse Child. "You knew him. Did he ever display some sort of latent strength of character? Some hint of inner heroism?"

Child crumpled up a sheet of notepaper in his neatly manicured hand, then threw it sharply onto the littered floor. The lenses of his glasses caught the light of the overhead bulb, concealing his eyes.

"I knew him," he said. "Yes. He lived here until he was sixteen, you know. And I knew him in Chicago too, when I worked for a paper there.

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He used to furnish us tips — for a fee, of course — about the other hoods. And we were the middlemen sometimes when he sold information to the police. He's the one who put the finger on Earl Artussi. He was working for Artussi at the time."

Ottman ground out his cigarette on the floor. "But what about when he was young?"

"He was a rat-faced, shifty-eyed kid. His mother was dead. His father worked in the mill off and on — something of an alcoholic. I remember Koback first in the fourth grade. He wrote a dirty word on the teacher's coat with his water color set during recess. I caught him in the cloakroom. I'll never forget the fear and the snarl on his face when I surprised him. I thought there'd be hell to pay. But the teacher said nothing. She carried her coat home that evening. It was a chilly day too. Koback bragged to me about it. For a while we were in the same gang. Adam Brooks was the leader."

Ottman interrupted. "You mean the police chief?" His voice was husky and because of his sore throat, it hurt to talk.

Child nodded. He rose and paced the tiny office. Somewhere in the rear a linotype machine was clanking.

"Koback was a hanger-on. We didn't like him much. I never went to his house or asked him to mine. But he had some influence with us. He would nag or dare us to do things.

"Like the night he got us to tackle a couple of kids he didn't like. They were boy scouts, younger than us. They passed through a vacant lot going to their weekly meeting. We pinned them down with snowballs. Then Koback started throwing them with rocks inside. He'd cached a pile there ahead of time, preparing for this. When one boy feel over flat and started bleeding from the head we got scared and quit. But Koback ran in close to get better shots at the second one.

"Adam Brooks came by then. He called Koback a yellowbelly and hit him in the face and knocked him to one knee. Koback didn't get up. Brooks dared him to, but he wouldn't. We left him there in the vacant lot.

"He left school soon after that. He was two grades behind most of us. He got to drinking pretty early, although he never gave in much to liquor. So you can't even justify his action by saying he might have been drunk. He had a police record when he left here, but nothing bad enough to send him up for. He had to leave. A girl was going to have a baby."

"This girl," Ottman put in, "maybe she —"

"I doubt if she found any strain of virtue in Koback," Child said dryly. "Anyway, the baby died. Koback himself was never a very healthy specimen. The girl is now happily married. To Adam Brooks, by the way."

Ottman gave a rattling cough. "There must have been something," he wheezed. "What about his hobbies as a boy?"

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"None. Oh, yes, he did have a .22 pistol. He stole it somewhere. He took it apart, put it together, oiled it, fondled it all day. He used to bring it with him to school and afterwards, or when he skipped school, he'd go outside of town and shoot sparrows."

Child shook his head and smiled thinly. "But he was never much of a shot. When he left here he got into the rackets. All he ever amounted to was an errand boy and a hatchet man. He took pride in the storekeepers he roughed up, the hoods he helped knock off. One time Capone's boys caught up with him in a hotel. He used the girl he was with as a shield and managed to escape. She didn't, of course. She'd been with him two weeks. It was one of his longer romances."

Child slumped into his chair, fingering his unruffled hand-painted tie.

"Funny how Koback finally got sent up. Two of them held up a drug store and mussed up the owner pretty bad. They only made expenses out of it. And when they picked up Koback's confederate for questioning, he squealed. Once they had the chance they threw the book at Koback.

"Of course, he managed to get a soft deal in prison. As an informer. He only got out a few months ago. I heard he was trying to break into the dope racket. I don't know what he was doing here —"

The door was flung open and a young man suddenly filled the room. He was slight and lean, but there was an animal magnetism in his quick movements. The top buttons of his sport shirt were open, showing a bronzed throat and chest.

"Hi, Dad," he called in a rich voice.

Child clapped an arm around the boy's shoulders.

"My son Richard, Mr. Ottman," he beamed. "A budding actor. He had the lead in his senior class play and he's going to major in dramatics at Dexter Academy next fall, eh, boy?"

Richard grinned and unconsciously brushed back his flowing black hair.

"I wanted to tell you, Dad," he said. "I got a part with the Birch City Players. A good part too — seventeen pages. I start rehearsing tonight."

"Splendid!" The long face of the editor curved in a smile and he patted his son's back.

"So," Richard's face fell, "I guess that means the part-time job here is out. I'll have to rehearse nearly every night."

"Of course! Don't scatter your shots, boy."

The youth radiated cheer again. "Thanks, Dad."

He stepped toward the door. "Oh, the garage phoned. The convertible is okay now, so I'll go pick it up."

He opened the door and threw back a last contagious grin. "Nice to have met you, Mr. Ottman."

"There, you see!" Child's voice clashed with the distant linotype. "Some of us try to raise children the community can be proud of. We work

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and scrimp and pay taxes. It isn't always easy. But do magazines want to eulogize us? Oh, no! They're too busy glorifying two-bit gangsters! Did the editor of *True Crime Detective Monthly* ever think of that?"

Ottman looked out of the window.

"Excuse me," muttered Child. "Your editor is right, of course. If you can find virtue in a rat like Koback, it means —"

"That man is only a cut below the angels after all," Ottman croaked, closing his notebook and standing up.

"I was going to get you some tea," said the old lady, reappearing from the shadows, "but the best thing for that nasty cold of yours is a hot toddy. I made one for myself too."

Ottman thanked her. He took the glass from the china saucer and sipped the hot drink.

"Yes," said Miss Albro. "I remember Koback. I remember every student from every class in those days." She smiled absently. "But I cannot seem to recall a single student from last year's class."

One side of her withered old face was immobile, evidently paralyzed from some stroke. Her right eye was active, darting about like a bird's. Her left was glazed and motionless. The gloom of the musty apartment softened the deep wrinkles of her face.

"Adam Brooks and Jesse Child and Koback were all in that class," she went on. "Koback was what I always called him — I called the other children by their first names, but I never could bring myself to do so in his case. I know that science has disproved the theory that you can judge people by their appearance. But I think you could look at Koback and know right away he was worthless. Yes, the three of them were in the same class. Yet Adam Brooks applied himself and got to be police chief. And Jesse Child had a hard row to hoe when he took over the town newspaper. It hasn't been easy for him, especially losing his wife and all. But he faced up to it and won. But that Koback —"

Ottman interrupted. "You know what I am looking for?"

She took a drink, then dabbed her shriveled lips with a paper napkin. "Yes. How did Koback come to jump at a gunman and die a martyr's death. I have wondered myself."

He waited a moment, then continued. "But as his teacher, didn't you ever see any sign of hidden goodness?"

She took a longer drink. "Goodness? On his last day in grammar school he went to my garden and rooted up every flower there. I often spoke of my prize-winning delphiniums in class. He waited until he was beyond reprisal in school, then he came by night."

She drank again. "Another hot toddy, Mr. Ottman?"

"No, thanks. I still have half of this one."

"Then if you will excuse me I'll make myself another."

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Chief of Police Adam Brooks's white frame house needed painting. Ottman never got to see how the interior looked. Brooks spoke to him from the front doorstep. Ottman heard dishes rattling inside the house, but the noise stopped as soon as he mentioned Victor Koback's name.

Brooks told him that everything there was to be known about Koback was in the Chicago police files.

"But I'm interested in little habits and traits which might have developed into a kind of unselfishness, or a rash sort of bravery."

Brooks, small, lithe, dark, with large black eyes and a pencil mustache, shook his head slightly.

"You are wasting your time here."

"But you were boys together."

Brooks rubbed a glinting wedding band with his small right hand. "That means nothing now. There were many of us. Jesse Child became a newspaper editor. I became a policeman. Koback became a hoodlum. What we were once does not matter."

Ottman put his hands in his pocket. The damp evening air was chilly. "But you must feel something about him. You hurried to catch Red Jack Fisher after he shot Koback."

Brooks stepped back into the house and closed the door halfway. "No one shoots and steals in this town and gets away with it. I don't care who they shoot or who they rob. This will be no playground for Chicago's gangsters." The door began to swing shut.

Ottman moved forward. He gambled. "Wait! Could I speak to your wife, please? I understand she once knew Koback."

The door stopped moving. Brooks's face peered out and his jet eyes gleamed like opaque jewels.

"I can assure you," he said, and his voice was very subdued, "my wife can tell you of nothing chivalrous in Koback's background. Good night!"

Earl Tyson mopped his raw-red pudgy face. He smiled with three chins. Sure, he knew Koback. He was Koback's boss twenty — let's see — 28 years ago. Just when he was starting up his service station. Things were pretty rough then.

How was Koback? A lousy worker. Always late, always insulting, always a couple other no-goods hanging around him, bragging about their cars and their clothes and the women they could get. Finally fired him. Caught him stealing spark plugs from a customer's car.

Tyson laughed and another chin appeared. "He left town next mornin' for Chicago — an' took my Chevvy with him. Just for spite, I guess. I called the cops. They found it abandoned in the next county, so I didn't press charges."

Ottman nodded.

"I didn't know him," Tyson went on, "when he came back a couple weeks ago, before he got killed by this Red Jack Fisher. He was a lot older, kinda dried-up an' gray-lookin'. But he remembered me. His gas bill came to ninety-seven cents. So he tossed

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two fifty-cent pieces on the ground ten feet behind me an' says, 'Here y'are, you cheap son-of-' an' zooms off. I remembered him then. But can you imagine him still rememberin' me after all them years?"

Tyson shut his eyes and laughed some more. A horn honked outside for service.

The mill dust aggravated Ottman's cough. The cold had settled now in his chest and he hacked incessantly.

The bent-over old man with the empty, grime-freckled face reluctantly stopped sweeping and turned to Ottman. "My name," he grumbled thickly, "is Nolan."

"I know," Ottman rasped as kindly as he could. "But it used to be Koback. I understand why you changed it. I've come to see you about your son."

Something glittered in the vacant brown eyes, then quickly flickered out.

"I got no son."

"But you used to. Victor, I mean. I don't want to hurt his memory. I want to write something good about him."

"I got no son."

"But Victor —"

The old man spat in the pile of wood shavings at his feet. He wiped his mouth with a huge, vein-corded hand. "Victor! He no son of mine!"

Ottman tried to shout over the noise of the mill machinery. "But you raised him —"

"And kicked him out too!" cried the old man, raising his head for the first time, as if in pride.

"But he must have done things. Good things. Childish things —" The membranes of Ottman's throat were burning and his chest rattled when he breathed. He wanted to get out of here.

"Good things? Like packing a dog in wet concrete and letting it dry on him?" The old man glared, opened his mouth to say more, then turned back to his broom and pile of shavings.

"But — after he left home — didn't he ever write to you?"

"Yeah." He spat in the shavings again. "When he put in jail he write me. Say he need me, is sorry, want me to see him."

"Did you answer him?"

"Yeah. I say: Dear Victor, Go to hell."

Ottman sprawled on the bed, his eyes fixed on the plaster cracks in the ceiling. His coat lay on the floor. An empty fifth of whiskey was making an elliptical ring where it stood on one page of the notes for his novel. The notes were scattered over the dresser and a few had fluttered to the floor.

He felt numb now. He could no longer feel the soreness of his body.

The telephone rang.

Long distance, New York.

"How are you getting along?" asked a voice. The prim, timid voice of the editor of *True Crime Detective Monthly*.

"Fine as wine," Ottman grunted

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blearily. He still lay with his face to the ceiling.

"You sound like you have a cold, Ottman."

"Yeah," Ottman groaned.

"How is the story coming? Having any luck?"

"None." Talking had revived the flame in his throat. "Nobody knows anything good about Koback. He wasn't the hero type."

"Well," piped the thin, cheerful voice, "keep at it. Keep digging and you'll find the motivation for his gallantry. You better see the local newspaper for pictures. This will be a standout story, Ottman, a real tour de force. It's something that needs doing. It proves that every man is a potential Sir Galahad, eh? It proves that no one can be completely damned —"

"Listen," Ottman rasped. "It won't go. I can't find what you want. Forget the damned syrupy parables and let me write a crime story. Just let me tell what happened. That's all the readers want!"

There was silence a moment, then a tired voice sounded hurt. "I don't think so. Keep trying, Ottman. Please. I'm sure you'll find something."

"I've tried —"

"You're a good reporter, Ottman. I'm relying on you."

Ottman sighed. It took too much energy to fight. "Okay, I'll try."

"Fine!" The voice suddenly held a childish eagerness. "Fine! Now take care of that cold."

"Sure." Ottman put down the phone and groped tiredly for the bottle.

Jesse Child pecked swiftly on his typewriter, intent on the open notebook before him. He wore a coat and tie and his top shirt button was buttoned. Yet he still looked cool in the tiny, airless newspaper office.

"Richard will find some pictures of Koback for you," he said without looking up. "He was going back to look up some pictures of his class play, anyway."

The black-haired youth grinned and left the room. Ottman, his loose-jointed body slumped in a chair, grunted hoarsely.

Child suddenly stopped typing. He shook his head and read from his notebook. " 'Mrs. Leslie Stoneman will analyze the influence of Nobel Prize winner T. S. Eliot on modern poetry at the Birch City Women's Club next Wednesday.' God, what a man has to put up with! Those witches have no more idea of what Eliot is trying to say —"

The telephone rang.

"Will you get it, please," Child said, as he resumed typing.

Ottman stretched out his arm.

"Hello. Birch City *Weekly*."

There was silence at the other end.

"Hello!" said Ottman again.

Another sound — a screechy, pain-racked voice which was almost unintelligible. Ottman felt his heart unaccountably pounding harder.

"Hello! Who is this? I can't hear you!"

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The voice gritted out: "I want the editor. This is Red Fisher."

"Who?"

"Red Fisher, damn you. I want the editor." There was a whistling sound that must have been his breathing.

Ottman's pulses hammered. Child stopped typing.

"But you left town. You got away with the money. After you killed Koback."

The voice was gasping now. "I didn't kill Koback. I got no money. I'm holed up with two slugs in me in a house in this crumby town. My boys run out on me. I wanta make a statement. But I won't call the cops here. They're hot to gun me. Now, for God's sake, let me talk to the editor."

Ottman thrust the phone at Child.

"Where?" Child snapped. "Yes. All right. Alone." He hung up and jumped to his feet.

"Any chance," Ottman asked, "of me going along?"

"What? No. He said alone."

Ottman shrugged. "You know you've got a scoop, Mister."

Child grabbed his felt hat and nodded. He paused. "Yes, I guess I have," he said, and left.

Richard came in as the door slammed. "Here are the pictures. Where did Dad go?"

"Out on some story or other." Ottman got to his feet and paced the room. This would tie up the loose ends. Perhaps unravel the entire skein — if what Fisher claimed was true. But he must have been lying. He obviously needed medical attention, but he didn't want to admit the robbery. He must be lying . . .

Ottman stopped by Child's desk, picked up the editor's pencil, and began to doodle in the notebook still lying open. The doodles came out as caricatures of human faces. He embellished them with cigars and mustaches.

After a long while they heard distant sounds which might have been backfires. Ottman looked up, then down at his sketches.

"Richard," he asked quietly, "what play did your class just put on that you starred in?"

The young man's neat black eyebrows rose and his clear eyes muddied a moment as he stared at Ottman. "*Life With Father*," he said. "Why?"

Ottman had New York on the phone and this was to be his moment of triumph. He waited for the savage thrill of justification, but it never came — even though he worked hard to produce it.

"You wanted to make a Boy Scout out of Koback," he snarled at his editor. "I told you it couldn't be done! I told you I couldn't find the evidence. In your benevolent blindness you could only say I failed. But I couldn't find the evidence *because it didn't exist!* Victor Koback had no better side. He lived a rat and died a rat!"

Weak protests from the other end of the wire faltered and died.

"Why did he tackle the bank

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thief?" Ottman stormed on. "Because there was something in it for him — *money*. A share of the swag. He was in cahoots with the thief. Get it?

"What did he do for his cut of the loot? *He jerked the blond wig off the thief's head.* Why did the thief pay him for that? *Because he wanted the wig torn off!* Get it? He wanted the red hair to show underneath.

"Why would a red-headed thief want to call attention to his hair? Because this man wasn't really red-headed. He wore *two* wigs! The red hair was false too.

"The whole thing was meant to frame Fisher. Get it? The thief instructed Koback to invite Fisher down here to talk something over — to be in his hotel room at a certain time. After the robbery the thief made an anonymous phone call to the police and they tore over to grab Fisher. Just before they arrived, the thief also called Fisher anonymously, told him the police were going to shoot him down, and that he'd better come out fighting. He figured Fisher would get his, the cops would think Fisher hid the dough some place, and the case would be closed. Then he and Koback could split the money. Except that Koback wasn't meant to be around either.

"The thief was only supposed to rough up Koback after the blond wig was pulled off, but he was playing for keeps. That way he'd be rid of Koback and have all the dough. He'd known Koback a long time and he hated his guts. Koback is still what he always was — scum, vermin, a two-bit gangster."

Ottman heard the office door open behind him.

"This man, this thief," he continued rapidly, "has worked hard and long — and he's failed. He's in debt and going deeper. But he has ambitions — for himself, for his son. Koback was no one to stand in the way of those plans."

Ottman turned to look at Jesse Child. The ashen skin of the tall man's face sagged. His coat was open. His tie was askew.

Ottman spoke more quietly into the telephone. "But Fisher wasn't dead. He just called up this office. He knew he'd been framed. The thief thought Fisher'd gotten away. When he found he was still here and ready to talk he got nervous. So he called the police again, anonymously, and gave them Fisher's address. Then he called Fisher back and said the cops were coming to shoot it out. This time it worked. Fisher was killed. Right, Child?"

An old face looked up and nodded.

"I knew Fisher had just called here," Ottman said into the phone, "so Child couldn't go out and kill the man himself. I'd have known it must've been him. So he let the cops do it for him.

"But I should have guessed in time! When he left here I should have known he had no intention of interviewing Fisher. Here he was, an experienced newspaperman, raised in the Chicago

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tradition, out after the biggest scoop of the year — *and leaving his notebook and pencil behind!*"

At last the voice at the other end spoke. "But you have no evidence."

"Child's son," Ottman persisted, "played the lead in a high school version of *Life With Father*. He kept the red-headed wig he wore. I just checked on it. There's a bloodstain inside it, where Koback hit Child over the head with the telephone receiver. I'd guess the money is hidden somewhere in his house. Is that right, Child?"

The man looked up dully. Behind his glasses his eyes were glazed. He nodded again.

"Damn you!" Ottman shouted at Child. "Why didn't you make up a story about Koback having a heart of gold? Why couldn't you let me write a goody-goody fairy tale like I was supposed to? Why didn't you?"

Child lowered his head into his hands.

Ottman turned back to the phone. "I'm sorry," he said.

"It's all right. It's all right," said the weary voice from New York. "You only did what you had to. I should have known better, I suppose . . . I hope your cold is better."

"Yeah," Ottman said thickly. "It's breaking up. My nose is starting to run now."

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Here is the third in our new series by Margery Allingham — another visit to the upstairs room of the Platelayers' Arms with our old friend Mr. Campion and his friend the Divisional Detective Chief Inspector, good old Charley Luke . . . Miss Allingham would most like to write in the style of Robert Louis Stevenson. She once said that Stevenson "writes very simply. Anyone who reads him has got to understand all of it, and to see all the beauty, however clever one may be, however silly. That, to my mind, is perfection. The day I get to write like that," Miss Allingham added, "I'll send you a balloon."

Well, Margery, where is the balloon?

THE MAN WHO UTTERLY VANISHED

by MARGERY ALLINGHAM

ONE NIGHT IN THE WINTER, WHEN the lights in the upstairs sanctum of the Platelayers' Arms were yellow and the roar from the round bar below had dwindled to a fitful murmur, Divisional Detective Chief Inspector Charles Luke and Mr. Campion were seated one on either side of the little fireplace over a discreet toddy before closing time. It was warm in that shabby eyrie, and the varnished walls, hung with long outdated advertisements, were as homely and cosy as an old dressing-gown.

The evening papers, which were lying on the floor, carried the story of the Frimley-Wivenhoe affair. That was the case, you will recall, which turned on the extraordinary behavior of the vicar of the parish in omitting to mention in his statement to the police that the "fiendish brute" that had attacked him in his vestry was literally wearing a tail at the time. The friends had discussed the business, and now Luke shook his close-cropped black head over Council's comments on the "incredible lack of imagination displayed by the authorities."

"Yet it happens every blessed time," Charley said, his shrewd eyes dulled with introspection. "Witnesses tell you everything under the sun except the one item which struck them as so blinking odd that they couldn't bring themselves to believe it. I remember once, when I was younger, plodding all round the southern counties trying to identify the makers of a surgical boot, and I was told everything about it except the one peculiarity which was so unlikely that I never should have discovered it if in sheer desperation I hadn't tried the darn thing on for size."

Mr. Campion's brows rose behind his round spectacles and Luke, catch-

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ing his expression, nodded. "That's right," he said. "You've got it. Funny thing, it never occurred to me." He got up and the older man, who was used by this time to Luke's methods of story-telling; edged his chair back an inch or two.

"It began with an ordinary 'missing person' notification," Luke was saying as he opened an imaginary ledger of enormous size and felt for the pencil which was not behind his ear. "The woman came sweeping in to see me and I took no sort of shine to her at all. She was smart enough to look at, but you felt her skin was stretched over solid brass and that she'd get her own way if it was over your dead body. When I heard it was her boss and not a relative who had vanished into the blue, I began to understand her interest for the first time. However, she told her story very clearly. She was crackingly efficient."

Almost absently, Charley was building up one of his visual character impersonations as he talked, tightening his jacket skirts over his hips and thrusting his chin forward with an air which was both provocative and forceful. "The missing man was, she said, a Mr. John Joseph Sillar, owner and director of a small firm called Quips, Ltd. She gave a very fair *portrait parle* of him — five foot ten, walked with a slight limp for which he wore a special boot, had protruding teeth, gray eyes, gold spectacles, and usually wore brown clothes. She herself was the only other member of the concern, and her name was Hilda Marlip. They had an office off Custard Lane and they dealt in novelties for the catering trade — funny noses, bangers, streamers, paper hats, and lion powder — that sort of thing."

"Lion powder?" Mr. Campion conveyed that he hated to interrupt but would care to know.

"Powder to keep away lions." Luke took the query in his stride. "Makes you sneeze so much it puts the brutes off. Well, they sold these things and did very well out of them and Miss Marlip did all the work. She was empowered to sign checks and make wholesale purchases, so there wasn't too much for Sillar to do. He came in whenever he felt like it, as far as I could see, and then one week he didn't appear at all. So she simply carried on, and the same thing happened the next week and the next. Then she realized he hadn't drawn any cash for some time, and after a bit she got the wind up. It wasn't as if there was anything wrong with the business. I touched on that at once, naturally, but no, they were doing fine. Money was rolling in; even the tax collector was respectful. Miss Marlip *was* the business, she pointed out, so she *knew*."

Luke broke off to reach for his glass and stood sipping it, his eyes bright above its clouded rim. "She told me she'd been to the flat where he lived alone — he was a bachelor — and could neither get in nor find out any news of him. She'd telephoned the hospitals and inquired at the morgue, and

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finally she'd gone back to the flat which was on the top of one of those old houses behind Bedford Square and had climbed up the fire escape and got in. What she found there had startled her out of her wits — and I must say the way she told it she shook *me*. I got an order and went round with her."

Charley hesitated, searching for words to convey the bewilderment of that moment.

"He wasn't there," he announced at last. "Yet most of him was, if you see what I mean."

"Imperfectly," said Mr. Campion cheerfully.

"Well, his teeth were there, for one thing." Luke made himself a set of ferociously protruding tusks with his free hand. "And his clothes and his watch and his pocketbook and his ring and his boots — one of them surgical in appearance — and his keys and his morning paper, dated the last day he had visited the office, and his spectacles. They were all there together, in and around the big chair in front of the hearth, and they were very strangely arranged."

Luke illustrated his point with astonishing vividness, drawing himself into his clothes and sagging back on his heels. "It was the queerest thing I ever saw. The underclothes were inside the suit, the shirt and collar still buttoned, the tie in the collar. The socks were in the boots which were laced. The ring was on the arm of the chair — just where the hand would have rested and the wrist-watch, buckled, was beside it."

"Dear me," said Mr. Campion blinking. "And the teeth?"

"They were on top of the back of the chair with the spectacles, still open, around them, and they were both covered with a hat." Luke laughed abruptly. "My report read like a bit of science fiction," he continued. "There was no getting away from it. '*Gone to lunch in the fourth dimension*' — I shouldn't have been surprised to have found it pinned up on the door."

"Delightful." Mr. Campion sounded appreciative. "Did the lady get the inference?"

Luke grimaced. "It seeped through," he conceded. "At any rate she kept prodding *me* with long red fingernails and saying, 'He's gone! Look! Look! He isn't there!' until I took us both in hand. 'Routine,' I told her just as the lecturer had told me. 'That's what'll give us the answer — if there is one.' And I got down to it."

Luke reseated himself before the fire. "There was quite a bit of work," he continued reminiscently. "The more I found out about the chap the less I seemed to know. He didn't seem to have had the habit of eating out anywhere locally. He hadn't done any cooking in his flat — there was no food or crockery of any description in the place. He'd rented the place just about the same time that he'd started Quips, Ltd., which was two years before, and the rent was paid quarterly in advance from the office. No one knew of anybody going in

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to clean for him — in fact, no one in the building seemed to know anything about him, and even the people living directly below couldn't remember when they had last seen him. They also said they never heard him at night and in the daytime they weren't there themselves. He had very little furniture, few clothes, and the only personal items seemed to be some books of a semi-scientific nature and literally thousands of comic papers."

"Really?"

"Yes. Kid's stuff. Nothing sensational, just funny ha-ha. All very well read. There was nothing much in his wallet by the way except cash, stamps, and a couple of business letters." Luke leaned back in his chair, his dark face alive with remembered interest. "So it was just solid homework," he went on. "I always feel I owe that case something. It taught me the meaning of the verb 'to plod.' I was nine or ten months on it altogether, the work done mostly in between regular jobs. I had no luck — no luck at all. We couldn't find any firm of dental mechanics which would admit having made the teeth, and as I told you it was the same with the boot. Meanwhile, that woman kept nagging. The business was booming and she had to tell somebody."

Luke pushed a long hand through his hair until it stood upright. "It was a worrying time," he said. "Old Georgie Bull was the C.I.D. Sergeant at that time and he didn't make things any smoother. He was the most miserable old cuss who ever breathed. What with one thing and another, I was almost off my feed at the end of the time. And then one day I was sitting in my corner of the C.I.D. room in the old St. Mary's Street Station, with the blessed boot on the floor in front of me, and I suddenly got the urge to try it on. It fitted like a glove and I walked round the room in it. Caudblimeah! I felt like Cinderella!"

He looked slyly at Campion. "You spotted it, didn't you? It *wasn't* surgical. It was just a stage prop. After that, it was easy. I went round to Payne's, the theatrical people, who were the only firm who *could* have supplied it and got an address out of them. Twenty minutes later I was in a posh dentist's waiting room."

"Where?" Mr. Campion was taken aback, and the D.D.C.I. chuckled.

"Got you!" he said. "That was one you *didn't* see coming. Well, I sat there with my parcel and after a bit I was shown into the chamber of horrors. The dentist was standing with his back to me, washing his hands as they always are, the blighters, and when he turned round I took him by surprise. I just unwrapped my exhibit and we both stood looking at it."

From downstairs in the round bar, Daisy Chubb's voice calling "Time" floated up to them through the wooden walls. Luke drank up smartly and rose.

"There are only two kinds of men who become dentists," he said. "The ones who love it and the ones who

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get so sad about it — think round and you'll see I'm right. This chap I'm talking about was one of the second kind. He had no limp, and his teeth turned in, not out, and he didn't wear spectacles. No one who knew him as Mr. Sillar would have recognized him. He had been in successful practice for years and, quite obviously, he was miserable as sin. He let me do all the talking, but there was nothing much I could say, of course. There was no charge involved. Finally I just put it to him. I said, 'Is this your property, sir?' He said, 'Yes. Take it away, there's a good fellow. I — I've done with it — rather. Will that be all right?' I said it was nothing to do with us, and he saw me to the door. Just as I went out he paused and looked at me like a wistful kid. 'Don't let her find me,' he said softly. 'She spoiled everything. At first it was such a wonderful escape, but I saw it leading irrevocably to a stronger prison than ever. I had to get away from her, and I had vanished so — so utterly! I thought I'd made that absolutely clear.' "

Mr. Campion got up. It was late and the lights were fading one by one.

"What a sad story," he said.

"Not really." Luke was grinning. "When I got back to the station I went up to old George who was sitting looking out of the window and scowling like a wet weekend. I edged up to him very close. 'Sarge,' I said softly. 'You've always said you wanted to retire. Would you be interested in a nice flourishing foolproof little business with someone really efficient to run it . . . ?"

Note:

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Here is a deeply understanding story about an Irish police officer who believed that "the law is the law" — yet tempered his justice with even more than mercy. Superintendent Corrigan used a primitive method to solve a present-day criminal case — he had to in order to subdue proud Sean McKelvey, King of Inishcam . . . by that fine and poetic Irish novelist, Liam O'Flaherty, whose famous novel, THE INFORMER, *is a modern keystone in the history of crime-writing.*

THE LAW IS THE LAW

by LIAM O'FLAHERTY

I WAS SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE in the district of Kilmorris. It is one of the most remote parts of Ireland, on the west coast. The inhabitants are all practically of pure Gaelic stock, and during the centuries of English occupation they retained most of their old customs. A very fine race of men, industrious, thrifty, extremely religious, and proud to a fanatical degree. To illustrate this latter characteristic the case of Sean McKelvey seems to me worthy of record . . .

He lived on the small island of Inishcam, which is separated from the mainland by a narrow channel of about a quarter of a mile. Even so, this tiny channel renders the island an excellent headquarters for its principal industry, which is — or was, at least — the distilling of illicit whiskey. We call it poitheen locally. Except for one narrow cove, the island is surrounded by rugged cliffs, so it was an easy matter for scouts to give warning when any of my men came from the mainland to search for the still. And the islanders went on merrily distilling through the first year of my service in the district, just as they had been doing for centuries. In the same way, when the spirits were ready for the market, they could sneak over to the mainland during the night in their currachs and dispose of their goods in safety. I was at my wits' end as to how to deal with the nuisance.

Ours is a democratic police force, and, as I understand it, the business of a good police officer is to preserve order in his district at the expense of as little coercion as possible. It was impossible to adopt rough measures with the 25 or 30 families on the island. There would be a rumpus on the mainland, followed by the usual protests to Dublin by people who are always looking for a chance to accuse the police force of tyrannical conduct. I decided the only thing to do was to tackle Sean McKelvey in person.

He was the chief man on Inishcam and was commonly called The King.

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Sometime during the eighties of the last century, a party of British military and police invaded the island in the hope of being able to collect some rent from the inhabitants, who had paid none for years. On the approach of the authorities, the inhabitants fled to the cliffs, leaving only the aged and the infants in the village. The officer in charge picked on one dignified old fellow as the most likely to be able to give him information and assistance in dealing with the others.

"Are you the head man of this island?" he asked.

The old man bowed, understanding no English.

Then the officer, to cover his defeat and to impress the natives with the power of Britain, delivered the old man a lecture on the futility of resisting British law and told him to have his islanders parade at the rent office with their rent within one month, or else their property would be impounded. Then he went away, and some newspaper reporter picked on the incident for a story, and the story reached London, and presently there were scholars and other faddists coming to the island to visit the last remaining Irish king. In that way old McKelvey, Sean's grandfather, received the title, and his descendants inherited it, and the islanders politely accepted the situation, since it brought them revenue from summer visitors.

However, if a man is called King, even in fun, he develops a kingly manner in course of time. Sean McKelvey, being the third of this preposterous line of monarchs, was firmly convinced of his royal blood and behaved as if he had divine right to rule over Inishcam. Many a time he was heard to say on the mainland, when he came there on business, that the police had no authority over him and that, if they made any attempt to interfere with his person, he would die rather than submit to the indignity. And the islanders believed him. So that it can be easily understood it was a ticklish business putting an end to his distillery.

I dressed in civilian clothes and got a man to row me over to the island, on which I landed alone and unarmed, to beard The King in his realm.

It was a fine summer morning, and, when I jumped ashore on the little sandy beach, I saw a crowd of the islanders lounging on a broad, flat rock near the village, which stands above the beach. I climbed the steep, rocky path, which was like the approach to a fortress. They all stared at me as I came to the rock, but nobody spoke. They knew who I was and were not pleased to see me.

I will admit that I grew slightly uneasy, for the men on that island are of tremendous physique, tall, slim, and as hard as whipcord. The surroundings were even more menacing than the islanders themselves. Beyond the village there was some arable land, covered with patches of rye and po-

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tatoes. Beyond that rose the mountains, covered with heather and cut by deep, gloomy valleys. Fat chance my men would have trying to find a still in that impassable wilderness.

"Good morning, men," I said cheerfully. "I have come to see The King."

A man nodded over his shoulder towards a house in the center of the village. It was a one-storied cottage like the rest, with a slate roof, but it was longer, and its walls had a pink wash, whereas the others were whitewashed. Some flowers grew in the yard in front of it, beside a heap of lobster pots and nets that were hanging up to dry.

I strode towards the house. When I entered the yard, a man appeared in the doorway with his arms folded on his bosom. It was Sean McKelvey, The King of the island.

"You want to see me?" he said arrogantly.

He was about six feet in height and as straight as a rod. He was dressed only in his shirt and trousers, which were fastened at the waist by a red handkerchief. His shirt was open at the neck, and the sleeves were rolled up beyond his biceps, which were stiff, owing to his arms being folded. He was as muscular as a prizefighter in training, and as I glanced at his muscles I doubted the good sense of my plan. There was a fair stubble on his powerful jaws and upper lip, increasing the menacing expression of his arrogant countenance. His blue eyes seemed to bore through me, as they say in romances. In fact, he looked every inch a king, and I wished that he had chosen somebody else's district for his damned distilling, for his type is one I admire. But the law is the law and must be upheld.

"Yes," I answered. "I've come to see you, McKelvey."

"As friend or foe?" he asked.

Affecting a calm which I did not feel, I took a cigarette from my case and tapped the end on the lid. The other men began to crowd around.

"Whichever way you like to take it," I said.

"Well! That means you've come as an enemy," said McKelvey.

"I suppose you know who I am," I said.

"Troth, that I do," said he. "I know who ye are well enough but I don't give a toss rap for you or yer men. You have nothing against me. So I don't want you nosing about this island."

"Oh! Yes, I have something against you, McKelvey."

"What is it?"

"You make poitheen here."

"I'm not saying that we do, but even if we do it has nothing to do with you."

"I'm afraid it has. I am police officer of this district and I won't have you or anybody else poisoning the people with your rotten drink. That's what I came to see you about."

"Well! You have your journey for nothing. I'm taking no orders from you, Mr. Corrigan."

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"I'm not giving you orders, but if you had the courage of a man I'd like to make a bargain with you."

His face darkened, and he leaned back slightly as if he were going to spring at me. He unfolded his arms, and his hands crept slowly down by his sides, the fingers doubling over the palms.

"What's that I heard you saying?" he whispered.

He came forward two paces slowly, just like an animal getting into position for a pounce. Even at that moment I had to admire the magnificent stance of the man. The other islanders behind me began to growl, and I knew that my bait had taken.

"If you had the courage of a man," I repeated in a low, offensive sort of tone, "I'd like to make a bargain with you."

"And what makes you think," drawled McKelvey, "that I haven't the courage of a man?"

At that moment a young woman appeared in the doorway with a baby in her arms. She was a handsome woman with red hair, with a rather startled expression in her eyes.

"Sean," she cried, "what ails you?"

He wheeled around like a shot and barked at her: "Go into the house, Mary."

She obeyed instantly, and he turned back to face me.

"Speak what's in your mind," he cried.

"It's like this, McKelvey," I said casually. "You and your still are a damn nuisance in my district. You call yourself King of this island, and I'm the local police officer whose business is to see that the law is observed. There isn't room for the two of us. Well! This is what I propose. I'm ready to fight you and let the winner have the sway. If you win, you can carry on with your still, and I give you my word of honor that I'll not interfere with you in the future. If I win, you'll come along with me to the police barracks and give a written guarantee that you'll break up your still and obey the law in the future. How does that strike you as a fair deal? I'm putting it to you as man to man. If you have the guts of a man you'll agree to it."

For a few moments there was dead silence. The infant began to cry inside the house. And then McKelvey sighed deeply, swelled out his chest, and nodded. I noticed that the whites of his eyes had gone red and the veins of his neck stood out, as if they were going to burst with outraged anger.

"So help me God," he muttered, "I'm going to kill you for this if I have to swing for it."

"Just a moment," I said. "I have come here alone. Are you going to give me fair play and are you going to agree to the bargain I proposed?"

I wanted to infuriate him as much as possible in order to give myself a better chance of beating him.

"Who the hell do ye think yer dealing with?" he roared. "A rat like yourself or Sean McKelvey, the King of Inishcam?"

"Then it's a bargain," I said.

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"Put up your fists," he roared.

"Give me time to strip," I said, unbuttoning my coat.

As I took off my coat and waistcoat leisurely, he stood in front of me, shaking with anger and then he suddenly seemed to collect himself and master his rage. He bit his lip, and a queer, startled look came into his eyes. For all the world he looked at that moment like a wild animal of the African forest confronted by a hunter for the first time, awed and at the same time infuriated.

He stooped down and slipped off his shoes. Then he pulled his socks up over the ends of his trouser legs and rubbed some sand from the yard on his palms. By that time I was set for action.

"I'm ready now if you are," I said.

"Then take your medicine."

With that he drove with his right at my chin, and I ducked just in time to let it graze the right side of my head. Even so, it rocked me to my heels and it enabled me to judge the caliber of the man with whom I had to deal. I realized that my only chance was in being able to avoid the sledge hammer that he carried in his right hand, until his frenzy exhausted him. Ducking and skipping about the yard, I kept teasing him in order to keep his rage at fever pitch.

"So you think you can fight, do you, McKelvey?" I sneered. "You couldn't hit a haystack. I'm ashamed to fight you. It's like taking milk from a child. You'd better surrender before I do you damage. What's the use? Look at that. You thought it was my head and it was only the air. Man alive, who told you you could fight?"

And sure enough, although he had the strength and agility of a tiger, he was handicapped by knowing nothing about boxing. All he could do was to swing that terrifying right hand and trust to luck. Little by little he began to tire, and I was overjoyed to hear that telltale panting.

"Now for it," I thought.

I waded into him and landed twice on his chin with all the power in my body behind each blow, but the only result was that I smashed two knuckles in my left hand. McKelvey swayed backwards and then for the first time swung his left hand wildly and met me straight on the chest. I went back four yards before I fell, all in a heap, conscious but at the same time convinced that my ribs had been smashed to splinters and that the breath had been driven from my body. A great roar went up from the islanders.

I turned over and waited on my hands and knees until I recovered a little and then struggled to my feet. Had McKelvey gone for me at once it would have been his show, but the fool was dancing around the yard like a wild Indian, boasting of his prowess.

"There's not a man in Ireland that I wouldn't do the same to," he yelled. "Aye, or ten men either. I'll take every peeler they have and break every bone in their bodies. I'm Sean

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McKelvey, King of Inishcam, and I dare them to lay a hand on me."

And then he gave a wild yell that re-echoed through the mountains.

His men yelled in response, and somehow that pulled me together.

"Hold on there," I said. "You're not done with me yet, you windbag. Come and take it."

Crouching, he came towards me, his underlip turned downwards.

"Is it more ye want, ye rat?" he muttered. "Very well, then. Take that."

Taking his time and no doubt thinking that, because I slouched and swayed a bit, I was easy prey, he swung his right at me once more. It was so slow coming that I countered it. I dived in and landed a beauty on the mark. He grunted and doubled up. Then I lashed out with a vengeance, having found his tender spot.

"Don't kill him," screamed his wife, running out into the yard.

The child wailed in the house, and several women, who had gathered to see the fight, also began to scream. The men, however, standing in a sullen group, were silent and astonished. In every one of their faces I saw a look of utter astonishment, as I glanced around at them nervously, not at all certain that they were not going to fall on me for having dishonored their king. Not a bit of it. They stood there gaping, obviously unable to understand how it had come to pass that their invincible chief was down in a heap on the ground.

By the time I had finished dressing, McKelvey had come to his senses. He got to his feet and looked at me with an expression I shall never forget. It was an expression of bitter hatred, and at the same time there was in his eyes the picture of a shame that had already eaten to his very soul. At that moment I wished from the bottom of my heart that the result had been different. I saw that I had mortally wounded the man.

"You took me unawares," he said quietly. "It wouldn't happen again in a thousand years, if we met hand to hand every day of that thousand years. I lost my temper. You are a cunning man. Now what do you want with me? You won. I'm not able to go on with it." And his strange, wild, blue eyes were fixed on mine, boring through me. Never in my life have I felt more ashamed and sorry than at that moment.

"You'll have to surrender your still, McKelvey," I said, "and come with me just as you promised."

He lowered his eyes to the ground and answered: "I'll do that. Come on with me into the house."

Then indeed a strange thing happened. When I had followed him into the house, he went down to the hearth, where a small fire was burning. He took a heather broom from a corner of the hearth and began to sweep ashes over the burning embers.

"What are you doing, Sean?" said his wife, who stood nearby with the infant.

He did not answer but continued to sweep the ashes over the embers until

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he had extinguished the flames and there was no more smoke coming from the pile. Then he dropped the broom and stood erect.

"Come now into the garden," he said.

I followed him out through the back door into the garden that adjoined the house. There he handed me a pinch of earth and a twig which he tore from a briar bush, the ancient formula for surrendering legal possession of his house and grounds.

"But you can't do this," I said.

He drew himself up and answered arrogantly: "You won. You are now the master. Isn't that what you wanted to be?"

"But I only want your still. I don't want your house and land. Man alive, are you mad?"

"You'll get the still as well," he said. "You're not thinking I'd go back on me word?"

He beckoned me to follow him, and I did.

He was still in his stockinged feet and he moved as nimbly as a goat over the rough ground, leaping from rock to rock, at a brisk trot, so that I had great difficulty in keeping up with him. We circled a spur of the mountain that rose immediately behind the village and then climbed from ledge to ledge along a precipitous path that brought my heart to my mouth, until finally we arrived in a ravine. About midway down the ravine, he turned suddenly to the left and when I reached him he was pulling loose rocks away from what proved to be the mouth of a cave. We entered the cave and moved in almost complete darkness along a narrow passage between two smooth walls, against which my shoulders brushed when I stumbled over the loose granite slivers that covered the floor.

I was now in an extremely nervous state. I wondered: Has he brought me here to kill me?

The thought was a natural one. For a man in his state, his pride deeply humbled at being knocked down in the presence of his people and then going through the ceremony of "sod and twig," to kill his conqueror in an access of frenzy would be the most likely thing in the world. I remembered his terrible eyes and the unnatural calm of his bearing since he had risen after his fall.

At last I could not prevent myself from crying out to him, in a voice which must have disclosed the fear that was upon me, "Where are you taking me, McKelvey?"

"We're nearly there," he said quietly.

And then my fear vanished, and I felt ashamed of having suspected him.

Presently the cave grew lighter, and then we emerged from the narrow walls suddenly into an open space overlooking the sea. Here, to my astonishment, I found the distillery in full blast, attended by three men who looked at us in speechless astonishment. The still was set up in a natural chamber formed by an overhanging brow of the granite cliff, and there were full kegs stacked in a corner.

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"Give your orders," said McKelvey.

One of the men began to speak rapidly to McKelvey in Irish, using the dialect of the island which I did not understand, although I have a passable knowledge of the language. McKelvey answered the man with some heat, and then the other two men joined in the argument, until it ceased all of a sudden on a shout from McKelvey. Then again he turned to me.

"Give your orders," he said.

"Well!" I said. "I suppose the easiest way is to chuck them over the cliff. The rocks below will do the rest."

"Very well," he said.

He turned to the men and gave them orders in Irish. They proceeded to obey him with great reluctance. I stood by until the last of the stuff had been dragged to the edge and hurled down the steep face of the cliff, to smash on the rocks 400 feet below.

"That's that," I said. "Now, let's go."

We turned back into the cave, leaving the three men chattering and gesticulating wildly in the clearing. Not a word was spoken until we got back to the village. There I noticed that the whole population was gathered on the flat rock, talking excitedly in low voices. By the way they looked at us as we approached, I knew that McKelvey's reign was at an end.

I waited outside in the yard while he went indoors to dress. Then he appeared again, in his best clothes.

"Are you ready?" I said.

"If it's all the same to you," he said, "I won't go with you but I'll follow."

"But why not come with me?" I said. "I have a boat down here, and it can bring you back again."

"Well!" he said. "I swore that I'd never be taken to a police barracks or before a magistrate alive."

"But this is not a case of going to a police barracks or a magistrate. This is a personal thing between you and myself."

"All the same," he said, "the people wouldn't understand that. If I went with you now they'd say you took me prisoner."

I stared at him in astonishment. How could he still stand on ceremony, after having made such a complete surrender? Now that he was dressed and in spite of the stubble on his cheeks, he looked more a king than ever, and nobody would believe that it was the same man who had danced around like a wild Indian after having felled me. He looked so austere and dignified and magnificently handsome. But his eyes had lost their arrogance, and they had the bitter expression of a defeated man. There was no hatred in them, but they gave the harrowing picture of a sorrow that could not be cured.

"I understand that," I said. "Then I have your word for it that you'll come along later."

"I give you my word," he said proudly, "and I would not break my word for the richest kingdom in the world."

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"I have no doubt of it," I said.

I hurried away, anxious to get out of sight of those eyes. When I reached the office and told Sergeant Kelly what had happened he could hardly believe me.

"Just you wait," I said. "McKelvey will be here himself shortly."

"He'll never come," said Kelly. "The man would rather eat his own children than put a foot in this office."

"We'll see," I said.

And true enough, about an hour later McKelvey marched into the office.

In the meantime I had drawn up a document, which he signed without reading. It was all very irregular but it was the only way I could deal with a difficult situation. After all, fine character and all that he was, he was a public menace, and I had to put a stop to his distilling some way or other.

"Is that all you want of me now, Mr. Corrigan?" he asked when he had finished.

"No," I said. "I'd like to shake hands with one of the finest men I ever met."

He looked at my outstretched hand and then looked me straight in the eyes and shook his head.

"Oh! Come on, man," I said. "Let's be friends. One of us had to win. I've taken a licking myself many a time and I daresay I'll take a good many more. Don't hold it against me. I was only trying to do my duty as best I could. After all, you were breaking the law, and I had to stop you."

"I wasn't breaking my own law," he said quietly.

And with that he marched out of the room with his head in the air.

"Keep an eye on him, Kelly," I said to the sergeant. I had an idea that he might begin to drink at one of the local public houses and then run amok before returning to his island. From past experience I knew that men of his type are extremely dangerous, once they lose their self-control with drink.

However, McKelvey did nothing of the kind. He marched down to the shore, staring straight in front of him, and rowed back to the island without speaking to a soul.

"Well! That's that," I said to the sergeant. "McKelvey'll give us no more trouble with his still."

"I hope not," said Kelly, "but I have me doubts."

My own doubts were of a somewhat different kind. I was afraid that I had done the man a mortal injury and many a time during the following week I cursed the fate that had destined me to be a police officer, and one with a conscience at that. Had the man been a mean and treacherous scoundrel I should have had no compunction about overthrowing him; but he was, on the contrary, a splendid type that is of immense value to any community.

On the ninth day afterwards his wife called at my hotel while I was having lunch. I went out to see her. She looked ill and terribly worried.

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She had obviously been weeping quite recently.

"I'm Mrs. McKelvey from Inishcam," she said. "I came to see you about my husband."

"You look ill," I said. "Won't you sit down? Could I get you a drink of some sort?"

"No, Mr. Corrigan," she said gently, "it's nothing like that I want. But wouldn't you come over and do something for Sean? He's been terrible since that day you came to the island, and I'm greatly afraid that he'll never rise again from his bed unless you can stop the people from thinking he was taken."

"How do you mean?" I said.

"Well! It's how the people said that you took him, which you know well, sir, is a lie. And it broke his heart that they should say that about him. He took to his bed and he won't take bite or sup. He'll die that way. I know he will, for he's that proud."

That was just what I feared. I told her to return at once to her home and that I would come over early in the afternoon.

"For God's sake, sir," she said, "don't let him know that I came to see you. That would kill him altogether."

"Don't be afraid, Mrs. McKelvey," I said. "I'll see to that."

After she had gone, I did some hard thinking and finally hit upon a plan which, I felt sure, would succeed with the type of man that McKelvey was. This time I crossed over to the island in uniform, in accordance with the idea I had in mind. There were some people down on the beach, taking a catch of fish from the currachs that had just landed. I noticed that they touched their hats to me and bid me good day, quite unlike their conduct on the previous visit, when they scowled at me in silence. Presumably they had transferred their allegiance to the man who had defeated their king. Human nature is an odd business. Most of them followed me up to McKelvey's house and stood around the yard when I entered.

"God save all here," I said.

"You too, sir," said Mrs. McKelvey, who was alone in the kitchen.

As she spoke she put her fingers to her lips, as a sign that I was to say nothing about her visit to my hotel.

I nodded and inquired: "Is Mr. McKelvey at home?"

"He's in the room, sir, in bed," she said. "Won't you go on in?"

I thanked her and entered the bedroom, where I found McKelvey lying on his back in the bed, his arms folded on his bosom, his head propped up high by pillows. His face was very pale, and his eyes looked sunken. I strode over to the bed, an angry scowl on my face.

"So this is your idea of keeping your word, McKelvey," I said with a sneer. "You are the man that wouldn't break his word for the richest kingdom in the world. What the devil do you mean by it? Are you making fun of me?"

I spoke as loudly as possible, so that the islanders outside could hear.

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McKelvey did not move for some moments. Then he sat bolt upright in bed and the color came back to his pale cheeks. His eyes flashed with their old fire. He roared at his wife.

"Give me my clothes, Mary," he cried. "Leave the room, you. I'll talk to you on my feet and I'll talk to you outside my door, for I'll not commit murder on my hearth."

I left the house and waited while he dressed. I could hear the people murmuring behind me in the yard and wondered what was going to be the outcome of infuriating this man, who was very likely by now out of his senses. However, as he came towards me, tightening his red handkerchief around his waist, dressed exactly as he had been the day I fought him, I could see that he was in his proper senses.

"Now you can say what you have to say," he cried. "And this time, I'm warning ye, it's going to be a fight to the finish."

"I don't want to fight you, McKelvey," I said. "This time I have come here as a police officer to make a complaint. Nine days ago you came to my office of your own free will and gave a guarantee, as King of this island of Inishcam, that you were going to prevent your islanders from manufacturing spirits and selling them illegally on the mainland, which is my territory. Is that true or is it not?"

He stared at me and then he said in a loud voice: "It is true."

"It is also true that you are King of this island, is it not?"

"It is true," he cried in a still louder voice.

"Well! Then, why don't you act up to your promise?"

"In what way have I broken it?"

"I have received information that one of your men has been to the mainland within the last few days, trying to buy another still to replace the old one we threw over the cliff."

I had, of course, received no such information but I had a shrewd idea that something of the kind might have been afoot. In any case, it had the desired effect.

McKelvey thrust out his chest and cried: "There may have been one of my men on the mainland looking for a still, but if he lands with it on this island I'll break every bone in his body. I've been sick for the past week but from now on I'm on my feet, and you may take your gospel oath that what I say I'll do will be done."

"Well! In that case," I said in a humble tone, "I'm very sorry to have spoken so roughly, Mr. McKelvey. I apologize. I can only beg your pardon."

"You have it and welcome, Mr. Corrigan," he said, his face beaming with a great joy. "And now, sir, I'm going to take that hand I refused before, if ye do me the honor."

We shook hands, and I do believe that I never have felt so happy in my life as when I grasped the hand of that magnificent man. Nor did I ever afterwards, during my service in the district, have the least trouble with poitheen-making on Inishcam.

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THE ADVENTURES OF TIMOTHY TRANT

DEATH BEFORE BREAKFAST

by Q. PATRICK

LIEUTENANT TIMOTHY TRANT OF THE New York Homicide Bureau followed the sedate waddle of Minnie, his sister's dachshund, through the midwinter bleakness of Central Park. It was 7:30 on a Sunday morning, an unhallowed hour. But Minnie, who was temporarily boarding with Trant, believed in Rising and Shining.

As an Arctic wind slashed around Trant, Minnie paused imperturbably to inspect a sheet of newspaper which had floated to rest at their side. She put her front paws on it and examined an advertisement for the Ice Follies at the Center Theater. Hopefully, Trant kept the leash slack. Minnie, however, merely sniffed at the Obituaries and padded ahead.

The park was almost deserted, but, coming up the path toward them, Trant noticed the now-familiar figure of the blind man with the Seeing-Eye dog. Every morning since Minnie had inflicted these sadistic pre-breakfast hikes on him, he had met this pathetic pair. Minnie had on previous mornings carried on a hopeless flirtation with the German Shepherd. However, between Trant's firm grip on her leash and the Seeing-Eye dog's apparent indifference, Minnie's progress had been halted.

Sometimes the blind man and his dog were accompanied by a pretty, Gallic-looking girl and sometimes they were alone. Today they were alone, and as the dog steered his master between a bench and a large clumsily boarded excavation in the path, Trant glanced sympathetically at the blind man. His youngish face with its dark glasses looked harsh and hostile. But suddenly he bent to pat his dog's head and his tenderness touched Trant's heart.

"I wonder," he reflected dubiously, "whether I could ever get that fond of Minnie."

It seemed unlikely, unless Minnie made a drastic change in her pattern of life. She dawdled to peer down into the perilous depths of the excavation hole; she inspected a bench nearby and yawned. Then, as if she hadn't a care in the world, she tugged Trant into a skittish gallop.

When Minnie's business was finally completed more people were about and, as Trant hurried homeward toward the life-preserving prospect of hot coffee, he noticed that an excited group was gathering around the excavation hole.

Congenitally curious, he picked up Minnie and walked to the brink

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of the excavation. In the bottom of the deep pit, sprawled across pipes and jagged fragments of rock, lay the body of the blind man, and the Seeing-Eye dog, moaning despairingly, crouched at his side.

One of the onlookers, a blond young Army sergeant, was trying to lower himself into the pit, but each time he tried the dog leaped upward, snarling with bared fangs.

Trant called: "I'll go down, Sergeant."

The sergeant jostled toward him, his open overcoat revealing an Eisenhower jacket impressively hung with foreign and domestic decorations. "Are you a policeman? Listen, I saw it all. I was coming up the path. This guy was sitting on that seat." He pointed to the bench Minnie had inspected earlier. "The dog was off having its run. The guy got up to call his dog. I saw him headed for the pit. I yelled and ran toward him but he didn't hear and went over the edge. The dog rushed up, snarled at me, and jumped down."

"Get a cop," cut in Trant.

As the sergeant hurried off, Trant squatted at the edge of the pit with Minnie in his arms. It was improbable that the German Shepherd would cooperate with Minnie but the improbable happened. Lowering demure lashes, she gazed down at the police dog and yelped coyly. The police dog cocked its head attentively. Trant called to it and it did not growl. With Minnie under one arm, he swung recklessly down into the pit. The police dog did growl then, but Minnie pranced toward it with great coquetry. While she charmed it, Trant examined the blind man. He was dead. The skull was crushed and a jagged lump of rock near by was thickly spattered with blood.

Feeling a kind of cosmic sadness, Trant slipped the wallet from the dead man's pocket and examined its contents — $12 in cash, two ticket stubs for the Center Theater, an identification card giving the name of Andrew Stiles, and a battered photo. Trant peered at the photo. It showed Stiles in sergeant's uniform with the same pretty girl whom Trant had noticed in the park. They were standing in front of an ancient broken bridge, with a little chapel at its center.

Suddenly, as Trant fingered these objects, he experienced a thrill of astonished excitement. The idea was fantastic and proof was at the moment practically non-existent, but instinct screamed that he was right. If he could bluff it out . . .

Above, two policemen and the blond sergeant were standing at the pit's edge, lowering ropes. Trant supervised the lifting of the corpse. He coaxed the police dog into letting itself be pulled up, too. Finally, with a smug Minnie under one arm and the blood-stained rock under the other, he was hauled up himself. A policeman, recognizing Trant, hovered respectfully. "Okay, Lieutenant, we take over now. Guess there's

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nothing special you want us to do?"

"I'm afraid there is." Trant turned to the Army sergeant, intimidated by his own daring. "Arrest this man for murder."

The sergeant's jaw sagged.

"Murder!" gasped a policeman. "But he saw the blind guy fall . . ."

"He didn't." Inexorably committing himself, Trant held up the rock and indicated the evergreen bushes behind the bench. "He was hiding behind those bushes. He waited until the dog was off on its run, sprang out, hit Andrew Stiles on the head with this rock, and dumped the body and the rock into the excavation."

The sergeant's face was grayish green. "Lieutenant, you're crazy."

"That's what all murderers tell me. But we'll dig up your motive." He pointed to one of the sergeant's decorations. "That's the *Croix de Guerre*, isn't it? So you fought in France. Stiles did too."

In spite of the cold, beads of sweat were forming on the sergeant's forehead. Trant produced the photograph from the dead man's wallet. "Look at this snapshot. There's only one broken bridge like that with a chapel in the middle. That's at Avignon. The Pont d'Avignon. And the girl — she's a cute little mademoiselle, isn't she? I've seen her right here in the park with Stiles. He stole her from you, didn't he? The two of you never got on overseas. Then, on top of it all, he snitched your girl and married her. Was that the way it happened?"

The sergeant stood as though stunned. Then, with a look of sheer panic, he spun around and started to run like a madman. As the policemen dashed after him, Trant's exultation welled up. *He's cracked*, he thought. *I've done it.*

In a few moments the policemen had dragged the sergeant back. Trant surveyed the young man's guilt-scarred face. "Yes, I can see the whole picture. One of these mornings here in the park, quite by chance, you ran into Stiles and his wife and the Seeing-Eye dog. Suddenly, there he was — the guy you'd sworn to get, the guy who'd stolen your girl. And he was blind. What a temptation! All you had to do was to wait in ambush some morning when he came alone with the dog. With the excavation hole, it was a cinch. Blind man, left a few minutes without Seeing-Eye dog, stumbles into pit. A cut-and-dried accident case. And, in due course, what was to stop you showing up out of the blue and courting his widow?"

He shook his head. "Fine, but you shouldn't have stuck around. I see the advantage, of course. With you as a phony eye-witness, there'd be no embarrassing investigations. But, unfortunately, you overlooked one rather important point. Blind men trip and fall into excavations in broad daylight — yes. But *only* blind men. Not men who can see." He paused. "And Andrew Stiles could see. Oh, he'd been blind. Probably one of those shock blindnesses. But

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he'd regained his sight. We can easily check with his doctors and his wife. But there's no real need. We've got proof enough."

From the wallet Trant produced the theater stubs. "Two tickets to the Center Theater, Radio City. Thanks to my dog's interest in reading the newspapers, I happen to know that the Center's current show is an Ice Follies. A man who can't see might go to the movies, to a concert, to a theater. But never in a million years would a blind man, however much he loved his wife, take her to the Ice Follies. It isn't worth anything to someone who can't *see* it."

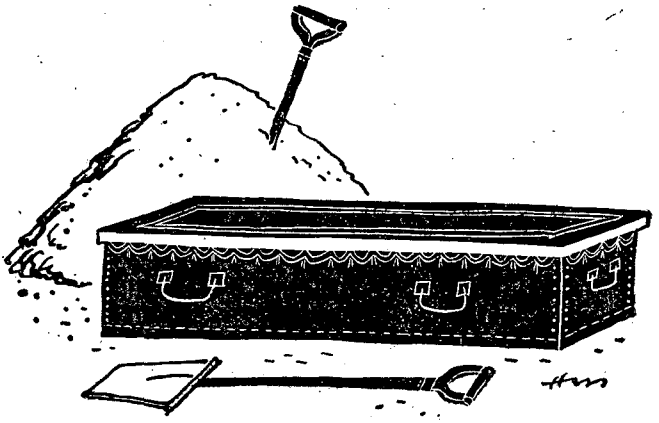
The sergeant, completely broken, gasped: "But the dog . . . !"

"Oh, the dog." Trant shrugged. "Stiles undoubtedly thought that Seeing-Eye dogs pine away when they feel they're no longer useful to their masters. Stiles loved his dog. For the dog's sake, it wasn't much of a hardship, when he took it walking, to pretend for a while at least that he was still blind."

Minnie was gazing at the Seeing-Eye dog now with entranced adoration.

Her tail was thumping while she squeaked her delight. Slowly the German Shepherd lowered its head and made a dab at her nose with its tongue.

Trant patted his head. "Okay, boy," he said resignedly, "if Mrs. Stiles doesn't want you now, I guess Minnie and I have house room for another boarder."



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PRIZE-WINNING STORY

We wonder how many of you have read Dante's THE DIVINE COMEDY, *considered by most critics, if not all, one of the ten greatest masterpieces in all literature . . .*

The fact that we have not read Dante since school days is one of the two reasons we were so attracted to Robert Lewis's story, "The Ninth Circle." In a manner of speaking, "The Ninth Circle" is a criminological condensation, a sort of detective digest, of THE DIVINE COMEDY. *It offers the reader, in a single short story, a 'tec trip through the nine terraces of the Inferno, thus giving the reader an opportunity to become reacquainted with Dante's classic while reading for sheer entertainment and escape. The other reason we were attracted to Robert Lewis's story is, from an editorial standpoint, more orthodox: "The Ninth Circle" is an utterly fascinating tale. We think you will find it, once begun, hard to put down. It has a mood and a flavor and a gripping quality all its own.*

THE NINTH CIRCLE

by ROBERT LEWIS

The President
Augustine University.

Dear Sir:

It is with profound distress that I address this letter to you. For two weeks I have kept silent, hoping that the rumors concerning the strange death of Laurence Wilde would die of themselves. They have, however, become more widespread, until it is whispered that Augustine's Board of Trustees is about to demand the investigation be reopened.

I know how Laurence Wilde died. I saw him die. Believe me, sir, when I say that no further inquiry should be made. I do not think it wise to go beyond the verdict of the coroner's jury that Wilde's death was the result of a simple accident. That is why I did not testify at the inquest; for the same reason I intend now to report to you what I know of Wilde's death, in the hope that you may be able to persuade the Board of Trustees to take no further action.

My name is Harvey McClintock. I am working for my Ph.D. at Augustine in the Department of Romance Languages. If you ask the senior member of that department, Dr. Redrose, about me, he will probably tell you that I am endowed with a normal

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amount of common sense. Dr. Anville will always remember me, I am sure, as the only Dante student he ever had who asked him whether Dante, in his visionary trip through Hell, stopped to eat. I am certain none of them would tell you that I am given to flights of the imagination.

In common with the other graduate students in our department I have a desk in that secluded room off Simon Hall Library, known as the Romance Language Stacks. It was in the very center of that room, in the aisle between the rows of desks and the bookshelves, that Wilde's body was found. You have seen the spot; but by the time you arrived on the scene the authorities had removed the body. It is fortunate that you thus failed to see Wilde's face. It seemed as though the last agony had riven and twisted it almost beyond the capacity of human flesh for expression. There was something so diabolical about it that Mr. Cortez, the instructor who found the body, has told me that several times since it has troubled his dreams; and one of the more sensitive of the graduate students, Miss Francis, went home ill.

The body was lying on its back on the floor, arms and legs spread out in a comfortable resting position that contrasted oddly with the ruin of the head; for crushing the top of the skull lay the heavy marble bust of Dante that usually stands on the bookcase of dictionaries at the far end of the room. The bust itself was undamaged, except for the base, which was chipped where it had struck the skull and then floor.

You may imagine Mr. Cortez's reaction when he walked into the Stacks early that Monday morning and found the body on the floor. Many times during the preceding day I had wondered who would make the discovery. Mr. Cortez took it well, all things considered. Miss Hubbell, the librarian, told me later that his face was sickly and a bit green, but that he had a firm grip on himself when he came into the Main Reading Room to tell her about the body and to ask her what to do. Mr. Snodgrass came in just then. Snodgrass is a retired lawyer who is studying Romance Language literature as a hobby. He said that the police must be notified at once, and it was he who telephoned.

You are familiar with the findings of the police. They discovered fingerprints on the sides of the base of the bust; and on the top of the bookcase where the bust normally stood. Both sets were those of Wilde himself. The medical examiner set the time of death at from 32 to 36 hours prior to discovery, which would place it between 8:00 P.M. and 12:00 midnight on the evening of Easter Saturday, March 27; a good approximation. The conclusion of the police, upheld at the inquest, was that Wilde, alone in the Stacks that Saturday night, had for some reason removed the bust of Dante from the bookcase, and was walking down the aisle holding it before him when he slipped and fell back to the floor. The bust must have

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fallen squarely on the upper part of his head, crushing it beneath its weight.

It was asked at the inquest what Wilde was doing alone in the Stacks during the Easter holiday, and how he had got in; for the library was closed from Friday through Sunday, and the doors locked. It was decided that Wilde must have come to the Stacks to study, and that he had let himself in with the key which was later found in his vest pocket — a key he was not authorized to have and one he must have had made from a wax impression.

It was asked why he had removed the bust of Dante from the top of the bookcase; for the bust was in the corner and so far from being in his way that he had to stand on the table to reach it. Where was he taking it when the accident happened? These questions were ignored in the conclusion.

It seems incredible to me that the mezzanine above the Stacks, which, as you know, overlooks half the room, was not even considered in the investigation. It should have been evident, from the force with which the bust had struck the skull, that it was from the mezzanine, *ten feet above the floor*, that it had fallen.

Before I continue, I should tell you something about Laurence Wilde. Perhaps it would be best to begin with an excerpt from my sketch-book of word portraits. It is my hobby to devote the little time I can spare from my studies to the writing of stories. To lend authenticity to my modest efforts, I maintain a file of descriptions of interesting faces.

Laurence Wilde had an unusual face. I looked up from my desk in the Stacks one day to see it bending over me out of the Renaissance: a long face, lean, dark, and full of vitality, contrasting oddly with his fine silvery hair. His eyebrows were black, arched and slightly tufted. When he opened his mouth to speak, I saw a beautifully even set of teeth, so functionally animal that they gave the face a leonine cast.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Can you tell me if this desk has been assigned to anyone?"

The desk he indicated was the one next to mine. I assured him it was vacant. At the same time, I was thinking, "If I ever need a Mephistopheles for a story, here he is." Wilde put down his brief-case, then turned to me and said, "Apparently we are to be neighbors. My name is Laurence Wilde."

I told him mine, and we shook hands. He did not smile, nor, upon reflection, can I recall a single instance of his ever doing so. "I shall be taking some courses here this year," he said. "I trust you will be so obliging as to explain the library rules to me." As he spoke, he inclined toward me in a formal, rather stilted way that seemed peculiarly appropriate to the gravity of his face and to the slightly old-fashioned language he affected.

I devoted a few minutes to the explanation he wanted, and then showed

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him around the Stacks. At the end of our little tour he thanked me politely but with little cordiality, and we sat down at our desks. From that time on he never addressed a word to anyone of us in the Stacks, unless he had been addressed first.

Our meeting must have taken place on October 2, for thumbing through my sketch-book I find my first entry on Wilde under that date. I will spare you the repetition of detail, but the following notes are pertinent:

". . . and when he grasps your hand, you are startled at its coldness; not the negative clammy coldness of pallid anemic girls, but the assertive coldness of ice. His firm grip belies the supposition of lack of vigor, yet his lips have a bluish tinge that suggests cold. Can it be that he has poor blood circulation? Or a heart ailment? . . . Well-groomed. Nails perhaps a trifle too long for usual male taste. You are aware of them when he shakes hands. . . . Eyes intriguing. They reveal a sort of brooding consciousness, tinged perhaps with suffering. Any role ascribed to such a face in a dream of contemporary life would have to be a tragic one, conceived in high seriousness. Not Mephistopheles, after all, for he approached his problem with lusty glee; but Judas, throughout eternity feeling the weight of thirty pieces of silver . . ."

It was inevitable that Laurence Wilde should become a figure of mystery among the other graduate students in our department. For the most part they are quiet, serious people who mind their own business, but Wilde provoked excited speculation among them. At lunch one day, several weeks after classes had started, Miss Francis confessed that he gave her the shivers, and Miss Webster complained that Wilde had acknowledged his introduction to her with only a curt nod.

Mr. Cortez said, "I tried to draw him out a couple of days ago. I asked him where he was from. He simply said, 'Excuse me,' and walked away."

"There's some mystery about him," said Miss Francis with decision, "and I find it very unpleasant to have him around. I am continually looking up at him sitting at his desk with his coat over his shoulders, even on the warmest days, and wondering what he is thinking about. I'm sure it's something dreadful — he broods so! Mrs. Bosley was telling me she can't abide the man. She sits in front of him, you know, and she says she feels his eyes on the back of her neck."

"Oh, come now," I said.

"Well, if you ask me," said Miss Francis darkly, "there's some horrible crime on his conscience."

I realize, sir, that my notes and memories of the man can have little interest for you. They may, however, help you to understand a man whom you did not know personally, and one whose death was certainly the result of his own nature. Probably there are some who would explain Wilde wholly in terms of mental illness. I do not pretend to know the answer. But I believe it is pertinent to tell you

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what happened in our Dante class.

The Dante class, which this year is studying the *Inferno* of *The Divine Comedy*, is the only one in which Wilde showed any interest. As you know, *The Divine Comedy* is the poetic record of an imaginary journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, by means of which the Fourteenth Century Florentine, Dante, purges himself of his sins and finally attains a vision of God. Hell, the Inferno, is pictured as a vast hollow cone in the Earth, narrowing down to the very center, and grooved by nine terraces or circles, in each of which a different sin is punished in a different way. Through these circles, to the center of the Earth, Dante is guided by the ghost of Virgil.

During the first four circles, which punish the unbaptized, the lecherous, the gluttonous, and the avaricious respectively, Wilde seemed bored. He was unmoved by Dante's famous description of his meeting with the ghost of Homer, or the beautiful episode of Francesca and Paolo who are punished for their adultery by being driven forever like straw before the incessant wind, or the story of the glutton Ciacco, or of the triumph over Plato. It was not until the class reached the fifth circle that Wilde began to evince his odd interest.

The fifth circle, you will remember, punishes wrath. Within its boundaries those souls who had been prone to that intemperance on Earth are made to wallow for eternity in the stinking mud of the river Styx. When Wilde was preparing the class assignment for this section at his desk next to mine in the library, I heard him mutter to himself. He came to the class in a state of suppressed excitement and asked many questions.

What was the significance of the mud?

How could Dante cross such a muddy marsh in a boat?

How was it possible for a ghost to have enough weight to sink beneath the mud?

Dr. Anville began to read aloud passages from the fifth circle. Wilde sat hunched over his open book, his eyes glued to the pages. His face was pale, his breathing heavy. His hands moved slowly down his legs along his clothes, as though he were scraping something off them. I do not think he was even aware of what his hands were doing, his absorption was so intense. His hands rose higher on his body until they brushed his chest.

When Dr. Anville read the lines where the spirit of the wrathful Florentine, Filippo Argenti, was plunged under the filthy mud, Wilde snorted suddenly and then glanced around him guiltily.

During the next several classes, in which the sixth circle, that of the heretics, was discussed, Wilde resumed his previous attitude of boredom. He did not become excited again until Dante reached the seventh circle.

In looking through my class notes, which I take in shorthand and are therefore quite complete, I come across the following:

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November 21: Discussion today of Canto XII of *Inferno*. Dante now in seventh circle, in the first part of which murderers are punished. As usual with Dante, the punishment peculiarly fitting to nature of sin. Here the sinners are immersed in river of boiling blood to a depth varying with number and type of murders. Example: Alexander the Great immersed in blood up to his brow.

Question by Wilde: "Did Dante conceive of any mitigation for justifiable homicide? That is, are all murders punishable in the same way, without regard to possible extenuating circumstances?"

Dr. A: "Do you mean: would Dante have permitted a murderer to escape punishment because he was justified in committing the crime? I hardly think so. If you remember the episode of Francesca da Rimini, which we read back in Canto V, both Francesca and her lover Paolo were killed by Francesca's husband, Gian Ciotto, and Dante put the lovers into the second circle, that of the adulterers. But what did he do with Gian Ciotto?"

Wilde: "I don't recall."

Dr. A.: "Why, Francesca herself tells us. If you will remember, she tells Dante, *Caïna attende chi a vita ci spense*. Gian Ciotto was damned to Hell, to the ninth circle. Apparently the fact that he knew beyond doubt of their sin does not prevent punishment of his crime."

Miss Webster: "I don't understand why Gian Ciotto —"

Wilde (interrupting): "Why should the husband be in the ninth circle and not the seventh, where murderers are punished?"

Dr. A.: "Both circles punish murders, but the ninth punishes those in whose crimes some treachery was involved: they were traitors to kindred, to country, to guests, or to benefactors — that is, to those who had special reason to trust them. Paolo was Gian Ciotto's brother, and so the murderer went to the lower circle. What was your question, Miss Webster?"

Miss Webster: "It happened to be just what Mr. Wilde asked."

In the midst of this discussion Wilde's face had become covered with beads of perspiration and he squirmed in his chair. After a while he began to scratch the calf of his leg through his trousers. I heard a low, almost inaudible gasp, and saw him staring at the skin above the top of his sock, for his scratching had worked the trousers leg up to a point where the skin showed. It was brick-red and swollen.

The look of violent fear on Wilde's face startled me. His forehead was mottled and clammy, while his mouth worked worldlessly and without control. The muscles of his face literally crawled. I thought he was going to faint, but when I reached out my hand to him, he mastered himself with a shudder and pulled away from me angrily.

After that, Wilde stayed away from the university for a week, and upon

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his return seemed quite normal. It was not until the middle of March that the final link in this chain of circumstances took place. The assignment for the week was the last two cantos of the *Inferno*, the thirty-third and thirty-fourth, in which Dante reaches the ninth and lowest circle of Hell. Here, at the very floor of the universe, Dante visualizes a lake of ice in which are embedded the shades of traitors who, like Gian Ciotto, murdered those who had special reason to trust them. And here Dante expounds a new doctrine, which he puts in the mouth of a murderous monk, one Frate Alberigo, who is buried in the ice to his neck. The monk claims that, though his spirit is suffering the tortures of the damned, his body is still alive on Earth.

When Dante in amazement asks how this can be, Frate Alberigo answers that this particular section of Hell has an "advantage" over all other sections: as soon as the crime that is punished in the ninth circle is committed on Earth, the soul of the sinner plummets down to Hell without waiting for the decease of the body, which is then occupied by a demon for the rest of its natural existence.

In reading this passage in preparation for the class, I was struck by an idea, which I jotted down in my sketchbook:

March 16: "What a story could be written about the demonic possession of a murderer! Dante shows what happens in the ninth circle of Hell to the soul of such a man; but what would happen to his body on Earth, condemned for the rest of its natural life to be a walking corpse, inhabited by a demon from the frozen lake of Hell? Let us assume that a man is moved by some sudden fit of passion to murder his guest; the details are unimportant and need only be hinted at, since it is not the man's action, but his reaction, that we are interested in. As we watch, the murderer undergoes a gradual transformation, physical as well as psychological, which would serve to show the penetration of the flesh by the devil within. Would not this fearful presence reveal itself in a thousand ways to his associates?

"Perhaps the best way to handle such a character would be to start from the assumption that the murderer is only dimly aware of his unholy intruder. I can show him in a frantic search for self-realization, traveling restlessly from place to place, confiding in no one, lost in brooding thought, studying the occult sciences, seeking he knows not what, in an attempt to know himself. The climax must come with the striking home of the unbearable truth, and his consequent destruction; perhaps also the destruction of some of his associates who might have stumbled on the truth.

"There is only one face that could play the part, and that is Wilde's."

March 17: "Considered Wilde again today. He will do very well.

"In a way, I feel sorry for him, for his portrait will inevitably be recognized by the other students.

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"Must make additional notes: gestures, timbre of voice, etc. Will start story during Easter vacation."

The Dante class on Friday, March 19, was the last class that Wilde attended. This time his behavior was so unusual that everybody remarked on it. We were discussing Frate Alberigo, who had begged Dante to remove the ice from his eyes to afford some outlet to the tears that his pain was causing him. Dr. Anville read Frate Alberigo's description of his torment, and went on to the doctrine of demonic possession. At this point Wilde uttered a muffled cry of pain, put his hand to his forehead, and rushed out of the room. After class, Dr. Anville came to the Stacks to inquire about Wilde, but he had already left. Mrs. Bosley, who was sitting at her desk, said that he had entered practically on the run, and looked wildly about him, and then had run out again. She added, "The man must be demented — he was clawing at his eyes as though they were red-hot."

Even then I did not understand and thus, indirectly, caused his death.

This is how it happened. It was Easter vacation and I was eager to begin work on my story of demonic possession. As a preliminary I spent hours in the library reading old books on witchcraft and demonology. On Thursday, when I returned from lunch, I found my sketch-book lying on the floor. A moment later Miss Hubbell entered and told me that the library would be closed the next day, Good Friday, and over the weekend. Then she said, "If you see Mr. Wilde, tell him about the library."

"Wilde," I said in surprise, for most of the students had left for the holidays, "is he here today?"

"Didn't you see him? He was here a while ago." She looked around, then lowered her voice to say, "He startled me terribly. He was standing in the corner staring at that bust on the bookcase. He didn't hear me until I was right behind him, then he jumped and showed his teeth like a vicious dog. 'Oh,' he said, 'it's you.' Well, good gracious, who did he think it was? You'd think he hated me, yet the only thing I've ever said to him is 'Good morning.' "

I assured her that Wilde was eccentric and meant nothing by his behavior. I was thinking mainly of my displeasure at hearing the library would be closed over the weekend and I asked her impatiently how I could get in.

"You don't expect me to come down here during Easter to open the door for you, do you?" she demanded.

"Well," I suggested hopefully, "you might forget and leave one door unlocked. I'll be here Saturday."

"You won't get in," she replied.

It was not until I was on my way home that I connected Wilde's presence in the Stacks with the displacement of my sketch-book, and I wondered idly whether he had been lurking anywhere near while Miss Hubbell and I were discussing him.

I returned to the Stacks on Saturday, although I had been half-joking

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when I told Miss Hubbell I would do so. The Stacks are honeycombed with doors on all floors from the basement to the roof, and it was possible that one of them might accidentally have been overlooked during the locking-up process. I started down in the basement, going the round of the horseshoe-shaped corridor that surrounds the Stacks; all the doors were locked. They were all locked on the first floor too. I skipped the second floor, since the Main Reading Room and the Romance Language Stacks are on that level. Miss Hubbell let herself out by our door and invariably locked it after her. The third floor was equally secure.

I was about to leave, disgruntled, when a whim made me try our door. It was open. Amused that in spite of her prediction Miss Hubbell had blundered, I entered and sat down at my desk.

The silence of the Stacks was oppressive. I found myself repeatedly looking up from my books. Once there was a clinking noise on the mezzanine, as though a mouse had dislodged a book-end, and I started, upsetting a book; the sound of the book falling evidently frightened the mouse away. In the late afternoon the sky clouded over and a few drops of rain fell. About 5 o'clock I switched on my lamp.

When I went out at 6 to get a sandwich I left the lamp on so that I would have some light to see by when I returned. I did not mean to be gone long, but the restaurant was so crowded and cheerful that I felt a disinclination to leave after I had finished eating. It was about 7:30 when I arrived back in the Stacks.

Perhaps, in looking back, I now ascribe to myself feelings I did not have at that time. It seems to me that I was overtaken by an inexplicable dread when I re-entered the Stacks. And yet everything appeared just as I had left it: the door was still unlocked, the lamp made a friendly pool of light in the shadowy darkness, and my books were undisturbed. I cleared my throat several times, just to hear something human amid that dark world of concrete, steel, and books. For a moment I toyed with the idea of going home, but finally I sat down and began to read.

The next time I glanced at my watch it was 8 o'clock. As I looked around the room, a gleam of light caught my eye coming from the floor in the aisle opposite my desk. Curious, I walked over to investigate. There was a broken piece of mirror wedged in the space where the mezzanine column met the floor, at such an angle that the light from my lamp had been reflected back to me. I remember wondering, as I straightened up with the bit of glass in my hand, why I had not noticed the reflection before.

Some instinct made me look up. Perhaps I heard the intake of his breath. Apparently suspended in mid-air, a white face was looking down at me. It was a horrible face, convulsed with demonic fury. It was Wilde.

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In the fraction of a second before I jumped backwards, I saw that he was leaning far out over the rail of the mezzanine, his arms raised, holding something white over his head. My unexpected movement brought a scream of rage from him; there was a scuff of shoe leather as his feet shot out behind him, and, as I cowered back, Wilde's body somersaulted through the air and hit the floor on its back. At the same instant the bust of Dante, which he had been holding and had never relinquished, landed on his head with a sickening crunch, and Wilde's arms and legs opened slowly, falling restfully to the floor. And there he lay.

I need not tell you my thoughts as I sat down heavily in my chair. The more rational ones involved a disturbed sketch-book, a door left open, a ghost buried in the ice. I giggled hysterically as I remembered a line from my notes on my imaginary character: "The climax must come with the striking home of the unbearable truth, and his consequent destruction; perhaps also the destruction of some of his associates who might have stumbled on the truth." I stared at the broken mirror still clutched in my hand, and heard myself say, "It was a trap. He wanted to get me in the right position."

The sound of my voice brought me to my senses. Deliberately, not in panic, I decided to leave him there and to say nothing. I did so because I thought it was the best thing to do. If I was wrong, I am sorry.

Respectfully yours,
HARVEY MCCLINTOCK

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PRIZE-WINNING STORY

Dorothy Dunn was born in Portland, Maine, in 1913. Her family must have been rolling stones, for Dorothy's childhood was spent in five different states — Maine, Kentucky, Indiana, Florida, and Colorado. (The story of Miss Dunn's childhood would make fascinating reading!) Now — "when my life is just beginning" — she is anchored in St. Louis, Missouri, where for the past ten years she has been teaching teen-agers in the public elementary schools — teaching by day and writing by night. Her writing (difficult as it has been to burn the candle at both ends) has produced results: she has had many short stories published and one novel, MURDER'S WEB. *Her prize-winning story, "Follow the Leader," is Miss Dunn's first short story for EQMM, and in your Editors' opinion her best work.*

There is particularly good reason why "Follow the Leader" should be her best work. It deals with people she knows — teen-age school kids (yes, they are people); and it deals with a situation she knows through first-hand observation. This is the story of Rikki, nearly sixteen years old, a genuine, blown-in-the-bottle incipient gangster, and his corrupting influence on a susceptible slum kid like little Alvin. Both are punks and chiselers — Rikki is worse. Both make a fetish of being "smart" and "neat." Both practise the "cold stare," and, even more dangerous, worship the tin god that makes teen-agers "tough."

Yes, Miss Dunn knows whereof she speaks. She has a deep understanding of one of America's biggest problems — the environmental causes and the mushrooming of juvenile delinquency. Her story comes "right from the horse's mouth" — from the kids themselves, some of whom are her own pupils in a tough section of St. Louis. Her story is important.

FOLLOW THE LEADER

by DOROTHY DUNN

YOU'D NEVER THINK A GUY LIKE me, twelve years old, would be happy to be back in school, especially the way I hated school most of the time. And nobody would believe it if they knew it was Rikki Cusumano doing the convincing.

It all started with one of those guys on television. It was a play, and there was this terrific guy talking up to the

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cops real calm when they questioned him about a murder he done.

It was neat the way he didn't act guilty and the way he smiled and never batted an eye when he told lies to build up an alibi. A real neat guy all down the line and I wished I could be more like him. Whenever the principal asks me did I spit over the landing or take the first poke at some kid who smarted off at me, I always said yes right away and never tried to cover up for myself.

But with this new deal coming up with the third floor gang, all the thiefs getting together and being willing to take on a couple of new boys, it would be good to look people right in the eye and act smooth like you hadn't done nothing except your homework.

We got five thiefs in the seventh and eighth grade, and about ten chiselers. I always been just a chiseler, but Rikki, who sort of runs things, gives out the word that maybe I'm ready to get in on some of the real dough that careless kids leave around when they go out to recess. And that would suit me fine, I thought. I don't even get lunch money from my old man regular, the way some kids do.

He's okay, the old man. When it's brick-laying season he has plenty of dough and gets drunk and pays down on the television. We eat good and he gives me a buck to shoot any way I want. But when he's out of work he lays around the house and drinks beer instead of whiskey, and he gets so you don't dare tell him you need money for school. He don't like to be asked for money when he's down to just beer.

So I got to being a chiseler. You go around borrowing money off of the kids and you tell them you'll pay it back the next day, and then the next day you borrow off of somebody else. Or you can get the little kids to put up a nickel to play a game and then give them a piece of paper saying they just contributed to a worthy cause. There's lots of ways. But it keeps you working for peanuts and working hard.

Getting in with Rikki would mean stealing enough in one day so you could rest the other days in the week. And it's nothing hard to do. You nose around and act friendly to kids and you always keep your eyes and ears open to find out who's got money. Like Marty Ryan having ten bucks on him to pay a bill for his mom after school.

There's an awful stink in class that afternoon when they found out it was missing. Most everybody, including the teacher, thought it was Rikki, but he's real experienced like that guy on television. He says Marty's his pal, that he wouldn't steal nothing from him, and there's no way they can prove he's got the money.

We get a long talk from the teacher about stealing being a lowdown thing to do, and she even tried to jerk some tears about maybe Mrs. Ryan worked hard for that ten and really needed it to make ends meet. And she ends up by saying we are all responsible if we let the thiefs operate, that we should

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keep our eyes open and let her know.

But us kids that know how it's done wouldn't be caught dead snitching, so for all that talking she might as well have gone back to the history lesson.

The day after the television program I practised the cold stare and acted neat and important.

I was leaning against the pinball machine in the delicatessen smoking a cigarette. The bell would ring in about five minutes, but I decided to go in late and tell the teacher my pop was sick. She knew the old man was a drunk and she'd give me a kind look and excuse me.

Then Rikki comes in with that smart way he walks. Tough.

"Hi, Alvin."

I nod. He throws his books on the floor and shoves a nickel into the pinball.

"Want to shoot me a game for a quarter?"

"Fresh out of quarters."

"Yeah?" he said, looking at me like he was seeing me for the first time. "Too bad, kid."

He shot the first ball out, banging on the machine, while the lights snapped and clicked across the bathing beauties on the board.

Then the bell rang and he said, "You going to school?"

"Eventually." I went over and got a Pepsi off of Ernest, who'll always let you take a soda on the cuff. Then I came back to watch Rikki's game.

"Give me a cigarette, kid."

I only had two left, but I gave him one and he looked at me as he lit up.

"Why don't we play around today, Alvin? At least for the morning. You ever skipped much?"

"Not much."

I was feeling proud that my neat way of acting had gone over. Rikki must have spotted it. He never fools around with punks.

"Think about it, kid. I sure don't feel like going into that lousy school building. Do you?"

I was three papers behind in Arithmetic and didn't have my twenty questions for Science.

"I guess not, Rikki. Only what else can we do? I'm on the broke side."

Rikki winked at me as he shot out another ball.

"That's just the point, Alvin. I got an idea how we can make real dough. The two of us. I like you, kid. You got everything it takes. What do you say? Game?"

I gave him that cold look I was practising.

"If there's money in it. I'll be needing a pack of cigarettes before the day is over."

He grinned.

"You can buy a carton!" he promised. "Let's go. Leave your books here. We'll go over to my place to get things lined up. The old lady has gone to work by now."

Rikki's place was two rooms in an old house that was falling down worse than the one I lived in. And it was crummy. Either his old lady was awful tired, or she didn't care. The sink was loaded with dirty dishes and

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there was a pan on the hot plate that had oatmeal around the edge that looked two days old.

"Geeze, Rikki! You ought to clean up. Look at the roaches crawling over stuff."

"Hell with it. Soon as I get a stake I'm leaving here. And I mean a big stake. Not just peanuts from the kids at school. I mean a lot all at once. You know anything about parking meters?"

"Sure. But, my gosh. . . ."

"Nickels add up, Alvin. You get enough nickels and you got a buck."

"Yeah. But the nickels don't just lay there on the street. You figure on taking a crowbar and busting the meter open?"

He took something out of his pocket and flipped it up and down in his hand.

"This is a key, baby. It fits."

"Yeah? Where'd you get a key that fits? The City give it to you?"

"Never mind. A pal of mine slipped it to me. He got a better thing lined up, pushing sticks of tea around the high school. He let me have this for a small piece of the take."

"Where'd he get it?"

"You got to learn not to ask questions, Alvin. You got to be smart enough to figure things without being told. He probably had a friend who had another friend that knew how to make keys. Anyway, it works. I tried it."

I looked at that key and I could feel my pockets getting heavy with nickels. I wouldn't have to care about winning free games on the pinball. I could stand there and feed it nickels all day long. I could see the inside of those meter boxes. Just turn the key, open it up, and scoop out the take.

Then I looked at Rikki.

He wasn't smart in school and had been held back a lot. They had him in a special reading class, primer stuff, and he never did any of the other work. He was almost sixteen, but he didn't care about being older than the others and not passing. You can quit school when you're sixteen and that's what he planned to do. He ran around now with some high school kids that had cars.

How come he was picking *me* for such a sure thing? The way I was acting like that guy on television was neat, but it wasn't that neat. Rikki knew that I never done anything big, that I was just one of the chiselers.

"How come you'd let me in, Rikki? We never bummed around together much. How come you don't get Vanessi, or Art?"

He leaned forward on one side, getting closer to me and friendly, like he was going to give it to me straight. He looked like Mr. Walton in Room 3 who always acts that way when he's talking honest and man-to-man about not smoking or horsing around on your corner when you're a patrol boy.

"Tell you the truth, Alvin. I think you got what it takes. You're smart in school and the teachers like you. You got a slick way of dealing with

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the old bags, and that's better than smarting off at them the way Vanessi does. They hate Vanessi's guts. Any time I'm around Vanessi and Art they think I'm doing something. You know?"

"Sure. They blame you guys for everything."

Rikki laughed. "Well, hell! Sure. We run the place, but we still been blamed for a lot we don't do. Remember the third floor being wrecked the night of the P.T.A. meeting?"

I remembered all right. There was ink splashed from here to Sunday. The teacher's S-1 sheets, where she keeps a record for each kid on times tardy and absent, had been torn up. The books had been thrown all over, and there was a lot of dirty words written on the blackboard.

"Well, we never done that," said Rikki. "They think we did, but it was Al Gabler and his gang from high school. Hopped up on tea, and Al wanting to get even with old lady Meredith for something she said to him three years ago. You know Al?"

"No," I said.

"He's a crazy guy. But a real big shot. You ought to see the roll he carries. Bet he never has less than fifty or a hundred!"

"Then he can't be so crazy!" I began to see myself with a roll like that. "How do we manage to use the key, Rikki? The meters being right on the street and all. Do we wait until real late?"

"No, kid. We pull it off like we do the jobs at school. Horseplay and the cover-up. You know. Just a couple of lively kids. You got your yo-yo with you?"

I patted my pocket and gave him the nod. I won a sweater last year in the yo-yo contest and I practise all the time.

"Good. And I got this."

Rikki went over to a pile of boxes in the corner of the room and picked up the footstool that he'd just finished in manual training class.

"Yeah," I said. "But why? What's a yo-yo and a stool got to do with it?"

Rikki's eyes were shining now.

"We go over on Manchester, see? Between 12 and 1, when nobody wonders if we're playing hookey. People are too busy eating to stop at the curb and watch a young kid like you do spank-the-baby with your yo-yo. We just stop to hang around and I'm tired of carrying my stool. I set it over the top of the meter and pretend to be leaning on it. That'll sort of hide what I'm really doing. If anybody comes along and seems to be looking, you can shoot the yo-yo at them and take their attention away from me. Get it?"

I got it. That's another reason Rikki chose me, besides the teachers liking me. There's no kid in school can handle a yo-yo the way I can.

For a minute I thought about maybe I was being a sucker, that Rikki might be getting me into something that would be a lot of trouble. But only for a minute.

I thought about needing a pack of

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cigarettes and not having the money. I thought about the old man not working right now. And it was Friday. All the kids would be at the movies that night, but I didn't have the dough to get in. And I wanted to be there like everybody else.

We left the house and cut down alleys to the car line. Rikki paid my fare over to Manchester and then we stopped in the drug store. He bought a pack of cigarettes and we played the pinball until a little after noon. The crowd was off the street now and mostly in places eating.

"Okay, kid," said Rikki. "Let's go."

We took just three meters in the first block, skipping about five after each take.

"Practice," Rikki told me. "We'll get it down smooth if we start out slow."

After the three meters we just walked for a block. Rikki would feel the nickels in his windbreaker pocket and get five of them palmed and hand them to me, and I'd drop them in my own pocket. We counted the money that way, walking along, me swinging the yo-yo the whole time.

Altogether we had $1.85.

"Not much," I said.

Rikki laughed.

"You're nuts. It only took ten minutes. And I'm getting faster with the key. We'll skip two blocks and then take a couple more. Then we'll get a bus and go over on Chippewa, or somewhere. The meters are all over town. We can keep jumping like a couple of grasshoppers."

The next block was better than the first.

"I got an awful heavy pocket," Rikki said, after we took four meters.

"And I got a sore arm. I got to rest up on the yo-yo."

"Okay. Let's go into that White Castle up there and get us some french fries and a soda."

Rikki cashed in two dollars worth of nickels. He told the woman behind the counter he'd been selling papers the night before and hadn't had time to change the nickels. She was glad to get them, she said.

Then we got a bus and rode over to the south side. And we cashed in the rest of the money. We had four dollar bills now, and Rikki gave me two of them.

We worked until 3, skipping blocks, cashing in, moving on to a new part of town. We got eleven bucks each and some odd change.

We weren't far from our own neighborhood now.

"Let's quit, Rikki. We got enough. I'm tired. And you're getting kind of careless. That last meter you opened, you hardly held the stool over your hand."

"Hell, nobody pays any attention. But we can knock off for a while. School's out now. And look, kid. If anybody asks why you didn't show up at school, just say we skipped to go to the park. We went to the zoo, we laid in the sun. We just took a day off."

"Sure, Rikki."

"All day in the park. No place else. Got it?"

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"Sure. All day."

"Meet me tonight at 11 in front of Maxie's Saloon. I'm going to get me a shoeshine box, only I'll take the bottom out so it'll slip over the meter. I'll bring you along a real box in case anybody taps us for a real shine. I can take them away from that dumb Johnny Richards."

"Gosh, I don't know about tonight. After the show is pretty late."

"You can lose some sleep for fifty bucks! I'm after me a roll like Al Gabler's got. Get some good clothes and things. And maybe a car. And maybe go to California. I got an uncle there in San Quentin that's due out in a few months. He's a swell guy, and plenty smart. He can open a locked car faster than most people can do it with a key."

"Gee! I can use some clothes myself. And if I make the basketball team, I'll need three-fifty for the uniform. Last year my old man wouldn't kick in and Mr. Walton said he'd pay for my suit, so I told him I didn't want to play. Stuff like that gripes me. A teacher offering to pay!"

"Teachers give me a big, fat pain," said Rikki. "They think they're so damn smart all the time."

"Yeah."

"They keep telling you. All the time telling you. Teachers! They think they're God or somebody!"

"Yeah, Rikki. Here comes a bus. You going home?"

"Not now, kid. I got a date with Al Gabler and the high school gang. But I'll see you tonight at 11 after the show lets out. You better be there, kid. If you know what's good for you!"

"Sure, Rikki. So long."

I never wanted to be there. I was so tired I nearly went to sleep on the bus. But I was smart enough to know I'd better show up. The gang really operates at school. You cross it and you get your teeth knocked out. You snitch and some high school boy will work you over, saying you called him a name when you never. There's been kids already with faces so busted they had to have stitches. But they're so scared by that time they say the fight was all their fault and they can't remember who they were fighting with.

I decide on the way home that I'd better meet Rikki after the show. I figure that I'm in pretty deep with him and don't want to get beat up.

My old man wasn't there when I walked in. The kitchen was full of empty beer cans and no full ones in the ice box. That meant he'd gone to the Tavern to try to cadge a few free ones. When he went out like that, broke, he usually stayed away for a couple of days.

I emptied the trash and opened a can of beans and had a bologna sandwich. Then I watched television and smoked cigarettes until it was time to go to the show.

As soon as I looked at Rikki, I knew there was something wrong.

His eyes looked funny and he kind of swayed when he handed me one of the shoeshine kits.

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"You been drinking something, Rikki?"

His lids drooped down and he looked real mean all of a sudden. He'd been grinning before.

"I told you to get over asking questions, kid. And you better learn to do what you're told. Come on, let's go."

He was talking right in my face and I couldn't smell anything on his breath. But he sure looked goofy.

"Where, Rikki?"

"Downtown," he said.

We got aboard the next street car going east.

I felt silly carrying that shoeshine box. Like I was a beggar or something. And I didn't want to do nothing except go home, but Rikki is almost sixteen and he's got plenty of muscles. I wouldn't dare to cross him. Especially the mood he was in now.

"They ought to be loaded downtown," he whispered. "All day long, one car after another."

"I dunno," I said. "Seems to me it'd be safer . . ."

"Shut up! Who asked you?"

"Okay, but . . ."

"You turning chicken?"

"No. It just seems dumb to . . ."

"Who you think you're talking to, kid? You calling me dumb?"

"No. Not you, Rikki! You're plenty smart," I lied. "But jeepers! Right downtown!"

He grinned at me, like I was the dumb one.

"Empty as a church," he said. "All them busy streets. The shows let out and people go home. By midnight you just got a few bums left that can't hardly see the sidewalk."

Maybe he was right, but with the streets that empty a couple of kids would stand out and be noticed, I thought. You never know when a cop is going to cruise a block.

We got off at Twelfth and Olive.

"Suppose a cop comes along?" I asked.

"So what? We just been out trying to make an honest dime shining shoes. Just don't smart off at the cops. I brushed with them enough to know how to handle them dumb slobs. Just let me do all the talking if they come along."

I said he was welcome to handle that end of it. I always get scared talking to cops. Like I was telling a lie, even if it's the truth.

Rikki was walking funny. Feet kind of far apart. Not funny enough for anybody else to notice, but not the way he usually walked.

He was right about the street being pretty quiet. Just big stores along here.

He leaned his box over the head of a meter. It fit and gave his hand room to work the key underneath.

"Light up a cigarette, Alvin. And make like you're looking to see if a street car's coming."

I was glad enough to light up. I was nervous because of the way Rikki walked and seemed to be too big for his pants all of a sudden. He'd been like a buddy during the day. But some of that smart Al Gabler must have rubbed off on him.

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Finally, I heard the click and knew he had the meter open.

"Hold your box under here," he said.

I moved up and leaned my box against the pole of the meter. He scooped and the nickels dropped down like hail. A lot of them.

He locked the meter, picked his dummy shine box off the top, and said, "No street car yet. We'll walk down to the next stop. Pull the rags over those nickels, kid. We'll fill up that whole box. No time for cashing in tonight."

We took four more okay and the box was getting heavy.

On the fifth one we were all the way down to Broadway, and a wino stumbled right into us.

He was pretty drunk and dirty and he looked old. He grabbed at the meter to hold himself up, and he saw what Rikki was doing.

"Where'd you get that key? Why, you . . ."

Rikki gave the guy a shove and it was funny the way he played airplane in a circle to stay on his feet.

I felt like dropping everything and run, because this drunk could start yelling and the few people that had passed without even noticing us would stop and check up.

But Rikki was cool. He got the meter locked quick and put the key in his pocket. Then he went over and caught hold of one of the old man's arms to steady him.

"You're a dirty little thief!" the wino said, mushing up the words so you could hardly understand him. "I know what you were doing!"

"Okay, Pop. Never mind about that. What you need is a little bottle of wine. Come on between these buildings with us and I'll give you a few bucks to keep your mouth shut. Grab his other arm, Alvin."

The old man got a glitter in his dead fish eyes, and he was licking his lips. I didn't like the feel of his arm. It was like dead skin stretched over a bone.

"A little money would help me a lot," he kept saying. "Just for a bed and some hot food."

We got him off the street into a dark alleyway and Rikki leaned him against the side of a building.

I put my hand down in the box that was full of nickels.

"I can't see to count them out, Rikki. Let's just give him a big handful."

Rikki said, "Give him hell. Move back, kid!"

By the time I looked up, I saw Rikki's fist crack right into the old man's face, and I heard a thud.

He just crumpled up without making a sound and flopped out stiff on his back.

I leaned over, squinting my eyes to see better. There was blood running out of his mouth, and his eyes were open and just staring.

He never moved at all.

"God, Rikki! You hit him too hard. He looks hurt bad!"

Then I straightened up, sick. My hand touched the jagged brick wall.

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His head must have flopped back against that. I was shaking all over now, my stomach jumping up and down.

Rikki bent over and lit a match and took a good look. Then he got up, laughing soft and mean and crazy.

"He's not hurt bad, kid. The old bag of bones is dead. The no-good bum!"

I dropped the box of nickels and started to run. Get out, I thought. You got to get away from Rikki. Even if he tells Al Gabler to beat your head in. Run. Just run. Get home!

But Rikki caught me at the sidewalk.

I knew I couldn't fight him. I ducked his fist twice and when he connected with a punch, I yelled like a baby. Then I screamed as loud as I could, and he got his hands around my throat.

His eyes were close to mine now and they didn't look like Rikki's eyes at all. The tighter he squeezed the awfuller his eyes looked, and I knew I wasn't just going to get a beating from him.

I couldn't get my breath and I kept yelling for help, but I guess the only noise I made was up inside my head.

I don't know whether somebody called the cops, or whether they just happened by. All I know is that Rikki didn't care by this time whether he got caught or not. They had to tap him on the head with a nightstick to make him let loose of me.

My knees gave out and one of the cops had to hold me up. I leaned my head against his fat belly and started to cry. I didn't care now what Rikki thought, or anybody else. I just wanted to go home and watch television and be out of trouble.

Then all at once Rikki started acting like he was nuts, and he went fighting crazy. He was kicking the cop that had hold of him and was butting with his head and even trying to bite. When he started to yell out words, panting, I knew all of a sudden what he was trying to do. He wanted them to take him away fast before they found out what was laying back there in that dark alleyway!

It made me sick to hear him. Almost as sick as when I'd looked at the dead guy.

"Lemme go, you dumb jerk! There's nothing wrong with that little crybaby and you got nothing to hold me on! Where do you get off banging a kid with a nightstick? You hit me again and I'll ram it right . . ."

Then Rikki said a lot of dirty things and got to kicking again. It was taking all the strength that cop had to hold him, but he finally pinned Rikki's arms behind him, and there was nothing Rikki could do now except shoot off his mouth again.

"I was just playing with that little guy," he yelled. "It wasn't nothing else. Just horsing around. So we're out after midnight. So what? You got nothing on me, copper! I been around. I know what you guys can do and what you can't do. Why don't you

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haul me in if you're so smart? Go ahead. You got nothing on me. I'll be out by morning."

They started to call his bluff and drag him to the patrol car, and me along with him. I couldn't stand it. I could just see Rikki lording it around on the third floor, bragging about what he had got away with. I could see him getting the whole gang after me in a corner of the boys' basement, or over on the school lot. I could feel his hands on my throat again and could see that look in his eyes.

We were right at the patrol car when I banged on the belly of the big cop that had me by the wrist.

"He's lying!" I yelled. "Don't go away from here, please! He killed a man back there in the alley! That's why he was trying to kill me! Go back there and look, and you'll see. Honest, mister. Honest!" I didn't want to cry again, but all of a sudden I was. My throat clogged up and I couldn't talk any more. It felt funny trying to tell them all about it and not being able to say any more.

They shoved Rikki in the car and handcuffed his hands behind his back. Then the big one went off to check the gangway.

I never even heard of half the names Rikki called me then. And even with the handcuffs on, he was twisting around and trying to get at me.

"Just stand still on the sidewalk," the cop said to me. "He can't get at you."

There was enough of a crowd around by now so that I couldn't have made a break for it if I'd of wanted to. I looked toward the alley and I could see a flashlight flickering. In a little while the cop came back with the dummy shine box and the other one that was full of nickels.

He looked sort of sad, but his hand was rougher than it had been when he got me by the wrist this time. I had a funny feeling that he wasn't my friend like he had been before. He shoved me into the front seat and he made some calls over his radio in talk that I didn't get. I guessed that he was telling them to send a wagon for the wino, but the way he said it wasn't exciting at all. It was just like he was that flat-voiced guy ending up *Dragnet* on television. Then he got the car going and we were just riding along, and when I turned around to look at Rikki he was quiet. But he was biting at his lips.

The two cops didn't pay us much more attention. They started talking big words between themselves, something about addicts and people under sixteen rising 900 per cent in one year. It sounded like arithmetic, so I quit listening. I just slumped down in the seat and wondered if they'd hang me along with Rikki for that murder.

But it never happened that way at all. Me and Rikki never saw each other after we got out of the patrol car, and the only guys that talked to me asked a lot of silly questions about school and my pop and where I lived and who did my washing and stuff like that. They wanted to know all

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about how I happened to play hooky with Rikki that day and I told it all straight, just the way it happened. They were mostly nice to me.

They kept me in the City House of Detention, which I'd heard some of the older kids talk about. But they had Rikki in another place — worse, I guess.

Funny, all the time I was there I kept wanting to be back in school with the other kids. But they put me in the Thomas Dunn Home for Boys on Ewing Street. It's not so bad. They have television, the chow is okay, you get clean clothes, and you can earn money without having to be a chiseler.

I guess I'll never be able to go back to my old school. I found out I'm no hero, like those gangsters who stare at the cops and smile. Or maybe they really don't act that way at all. I wonder how Rikki's pal Al Gabler is going to act when the cops catch him. Al Gabler and his gang — suckers!

"Q"

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The very first short story about the town of Wrightsville . . .

THE ACCUSED

by ELLERY QUEEN

WRIGHTSVILLE IS A NEW ENGland industrial town famous for nothing, set down in the center of an agricultural county of no particular distinction. It was founded by a man named Jezreel Wright in 1701, and after 250-odd years its population is just past 10,000. Parts of it are crooked and narrow, other parts glare with neon signs, and a great deal of it is downright dingy. In other words, Wrightsville is a very ordinary American town.

But to Ellery it is Shangri-La.

Pressed to explain why he runs off to Wrightsville at the drop of a hat, Ellery will say that he sort of likes cobblestoned, grimy Low Village, and the Square (which is round), and Twin Hill Cemetery and The Hot Spot on Route 16 and the smoky burgundy of the Mahoganies to the north; that he finds Band Concert Night behind the Our Boys Memorial relaxing in direct ratio to the amount of noise and buttered popcorn produced; that the sight of the farmers' starched families coming with stiff pleasure into town on Saturday afternoons positively stimulates him; and so forth.

But if Ellery were to tell the entire truth, he would have to include the fact that Wrightsville has been wonderfully good to him in the matter of interesting crimes.

On the latest occasion he dropped off the Atlantic Stater at Wrightsville Station under the delusion that he would pass a bangup week at Bill York's Lodge on Bald Mountain, skimming down the second-rate ski slopes like a bird and sitting at tall fires afterward, soaking up contentment and hot toddies with the sportsmen of the town. He got no closer to the Lodge than the Hollis Hotel on the Square.

Ed Hotchkiss gave him the bad news as he dumped his skis into Ed's taxi outside the station and turned to pump the large Hotchkiss hand. There wasn't enough snow on old Baldy this winter, Ed mourned, to make a passable fight for Bill York's six youngsters. But as long as Mr. Queen was in town, there *was* that darned business of Ed's second cousin Mamie and Mamie's boy Delbert . . .

When Ellery had checked into the Hollis, washed up, and come down to the lobby to buy a Wrightsville *Record* at Grover Doodle's cigar stand, he was already half-committed to look into the case of young Delbert Hood, who was out on bail awaiting trial for

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a crime Ed Hotchkiss and his cousin Mamie were sure the boy hadn't had a thing in the world to do with.

Certain elements of the affair encouraged Ellery's interest. For one thing, the victim of the crime seemed the villain of the piece. For another, Officer Jeep Jorking, one of Chief Dakin's bright young men, was in Wrightsville General Hospital, his left side immured in a cast from the hip down. For a third, everybody in town except Ed Hotchkiss and Mamie Hood Wheeler was convinced that Delbert had done it.

This last by itself was almost enough for Ellery; and by the time he had eavesdropped among some Wrightsville ladies of his acquaintance, busy at their organizational luncheons at the Hollis and Upham House, and had chewed the fat with Chief Dakin at police headquarters and with sundry others, Ellery was ready to go the whole hog.

The background of the case, according to the ladies, was as follows:

Wrightsville had awakened one morning to learn that Anson K. Wheeler was marrying the widow Hood. This was tantamount to a revolution, for Anse Wheeler was Hill Drive and Mamie Hood was Low Village.

It was not as if Mamie Hood were young and beautiful. She was 46 if she was a day. Her features were definitely on the plain side, and one of the ladies reported that Tessie Lupin, popular operator of the Lower Main Beauty Shop, had never given Mamie Hood so much as a facial, and didn't her complexion look it! As for Mamie's figure, it was spready around the top and the middle and, when you got right down to it, so to speak, around the bottom, too. She didn't know what a decent foundation garment *was*, apparently.

And there was Anse Wheeler, from one of the old families. The Wheeler mansion on Hill Drive was a showplace. The Wheelers were proud of their name, careful with their money, and properly set in their ways. Anse still drove the Pierce-Arrow which had belonged to his father. They had never streamlined their plumbing. Old Mrs. Wheeler, who wore boned chokers and a gold chest-watch to the day of her death, nevertheless had always insisted on putting up her own pickles. And even though Anson K. Wheeler owned the big farm machinery plant over in the Valley near the airport — employing hundreds of people — he conducted his business the way his father had before him, along the most conservative lines, with 1910 bookkeeping methods and Anse personally picking up his plant payroll at the bank every Friday morning.

Anse had been First Selectman twice. He was president of the Wrightsville Historical Society. He was senior vestryman of St. Paul's-in-the-Dingle, with a cold rebuke for those so prone to Low Church lapses as to fail to call the rector "Father" Chichering. His grandfather, General Murdock Wheeler, had been Wrightsville's last surviving veteran of the

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G.A.R. His first cousin, Uriah Scott ("U. S.") Wheeler, was principal of Gunnery School over in Fyfield and one of Wright County's leading intellectuals.

Anson Wheeler had never married because of his mother. His devotion to ailing Mrs. Wheeler had been a beautiful thing, and when she died at the age of 89 he was like a fish out of water.

That was when *she* got in *her* licks, of course, with her imitation-lady's voice and sugary ways. Anse Wheeler, just about the best catch in town — and Mamie Hood, *his housekeeper*, caught him!

Mamie Hood was not only his housekeeper — a domestic, really — she had a grown child to boot. Delbert had his father's bad blood. There'd always been something queer about Alf Hood, with his radical ideas and his shifty ways. Alf had sent himself through Merrimac U. by stoking furnaces, waiting on table, and even more menial jobs than that; you always felt he'd do anything to make a dollar. When he opened his law office on State Street he might have got along if he'd played his cards right. Louise Glannis was wild about him and wanted to elope. The Glannises and their set would have accepted him in time to keep the town from talking, and he could have made something of himself. What did the fool do? Jilted Louise and married Mamie Broadbeck of Lower Whistling Street! After that, of course, he was through. He never got a single Hill or High Village client — the Glannises saw to that.

So high-and-mighty Alf wound up tramping the streets looking for work. But it was 1931, in the depression, and Charlie Brady was soon picking him up under the influence. Finally Brady caught him in the act of breaking into Logan's Market at 3 in the morning. He was trying to steal some groceries. Charlie took him around to the old jailhouse on Plum Street and the next morning they found him with both wrists slashed. Mamie gave birth to Delbert the week after the funeral.

Delbert was his father all over again. Mamie hired out for day work, so the boy grew up a typical Low Village street loafer, with no respect for property, and as uppity as Alf ever was. He actually nursed a *grudge* against Wrightsville. Swore he'd "get even" for what they'd "done" to his father!

A boy like that was bound to get into trouble. The Korean war ought to have straightened him out, but he came back in less than a year with a chest wound. By this time Mamie was the Wheelers' housekeeper, and all Delbert did was sit around the Wheeler kitchen making sarcastic remarks about the Hill families. For Mamie's sake, Anson Wheeler took him into the plant. Delbert lasted just three weeks. One lunch hour Anse caught him giving a speech to a large group of working people, ranting about what fools they were to stand for some of the conditions at the plant. Naturally, Anse had to fire him.

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How Anson Wheeler could have married Mamie Hood after *that* was the only real mystery in the case — according to the ladies. Anse had asked for it and he got it — two cracks on the skull and the theft of fifteen thousand of his dollars, and the sooner that horrible boy was sent up to the State Penitentiary where he belonged, the easier they'd all breathe nights.

"I'll take you up the Hill to see Mamie and Del," said Ed Hotchkiss eagerly.

"Wait, Ed," said Ellery. "Who's Del's lawyer?"

"Mort Danzig. He's got his office over his old man's stationery store near the Bijou, on Lower Main."

"I'll walk over to Mort's while you get your cousin Mamie to bring Delbert there. I'd rather talk to them in friendly territory."

"Who says it's friendly?" And, muttering, Ed drove his taxi off at twice the legal speed limit.

"I just don't know, Mr. Queen," said Ben Danzig's balding son worriedly in his plain office above the clatter of Lower Main. "There's an awfully strong circumstantial case against him. And if *I* can't make up my mind about his guilt or innocence . . . I've begged Mamie to get a different lawyer, but she's latched onto me —"

"Who's sitting in the case, Mort?"

"Judge Peter Preston. Of the Hill Prestons," Mort Danzig added grimly. "If the Judge hadn't been sick on and off this winter and the calendar crowded, I'd never have been able to delay the trial this long."

"What's your defense?"

Danzig shrugged. "No positive identification. Failure of the money to be found. Negative stuff. What else can I do? The boy's got no alibi — he says he was tramping the woods, alone, around Granjon Falls — he tried to escape afterward, he's responsible for poor Jeep Jorking's being laid up in the hospital, and there's that blamed handkerchief . . ." The young lawyer stared at Ellery hopefully. "Do *you* think Del Hood is innocent?"

"I don't know yet," said Ellery. "Del did me a good turn once, when he was bellhopping at the Hollis, and I remember him as a smart, nice kid. Mort, who went bail for him?"

"Anson Wheeler."

"*Wheeler?*"

"Well, the boy's ma is Anse's wife now, isn't she? You know the cockeyed code these old Hill families live by."

"But — then why did Wheeler press the charge?"

"That," said Morton F. Danzig dryly, "is another section of said code. *I* don't pretend to understand it . . . Oh, come in!"

Mamie Hood Wheeler was a plump, sturdy woman who looked like any year's All-American Mother, dressed up for the annual ceremony. She wore a modish hat and a Persian lamb coat which shrieked of newness and Boston. There was nothing Boston

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could do for her hands, however; they were worked out, in ruins, and beyond repair. From the state of her eyes, she had been crying since September, and this was January.

If she'd stop crying, Ellery thought, she'd be an attractive woman. What were those women talking about?

"Now, now, Mrs. Wheeler," he said, taking her hands. "I can't promise anything."

"I know you'll get my Del off," she sobbed. She had a soft, surprisingly cultivated, voice. "Thank you, thank you, Mr. Queen!"

"Mom." The tall boy with her was embarrassed. He was lean and burnt-out-looking, with a slow, unhappy smile. "Hello, Mr. Queen. What do you want to bother with me for?"

"Del," said Ellery, looking him in the eye, "did you hold up your stepfather on the Ridge Road last September twenty-first and rob him of his payroll?"

"No, sir. But I don't expect you to believe me."

"No reason why you should," Ellery said cheerfully. "Tell me this, Del: How do you explain that handkerchief?"

"It was planted. I hadn't worn it for weeks — I thought I'd lost it."

"But he didn't mention it to anybody," said Mort Danzig. "Just to make it harder."

"I tell you I'm being framed, Mr. Danzig!"

"And this, Del," said Ellery. "Why, when Officer Jorking arrested you, did you try to run for it?"

"Because I went chicken. I knew they'd all hang it on me. It wasn't only the handkerchief. There were all those fights I'd had with old Anse."

"Del," said his mother, "don't speak about your — about Mr. Wheeler that way. He thinks he's doing the right thing. What we've got to do is convince him — everybody — that you had nothing to do with it."

"What do you want me to do, mom," cried the tall boy, "kiss his foot for trying to send me to prison? He's had it in for me from the day he caught me explaining to some of his plant workers what suckers they are. I should have cleared out then!"

"You've been out on bail for months," remarked Ellery. "Why haven't you cleared out while you've had the chance?"

The boy flushed. "I'm not that big a rat, with him putting up the bail. Besides, my mother still has to live in this one-horse town. The only thing I'm sorry about is that I lost my head when Jorking tried to pull me in."

"And you're still living in your stepfather's house, Del?"

"It's my mother's house now, too, isn't it?" Delbert said defiantly. "She's got some rights as his wife."

"Del," moaned Mamie.

"But isn't it awkward, Del? For you as well as for Mr. Wheeler?"

"We just ignore each other."

"Seems to me," said Ellery, "your stepfather's been awfully decent about several phases of this affair."

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"All right!" shouted Delbert Hood. "I'll give him my Purple Heart!"

That was one of the things Ellery liked about this case. The villain was something of a saint and the young hero could have used a timely kick in the pants.

"Well, Delbert, there's only one way to get you out of this hole. If you're innocent, somebody else is guilty. Take your mom home and stay there with her. You'll hear from me."

Ellery crossed the Square to the Wrightsville National Bank and asked to see its president, Wolfert Van Horn.

Old Wolf hadn't changed. He merely looked older, scratchier, and more wolfish. He eyed Ellery's hand as if it were diseased and sat back to click his dentures carnivorously.

"You'll get no cooperation from me, Queen," said Wrightsville's leading banker in his knifelike voice. "That boy's guilty and Anse Wheeler is one of my bank's best customers. Would you like to open an account?"

"Now, Wolfert," said Ellery soothingly, "all I'm trying to do is pick up the facts of a business that happened almost five months ago. Tell me how Anson Wheeler's regular payroll day happened to be changed after so many years."

"Nothing to tell," said Wolfert Van Horn. "Tellers always made up Anse's payroll Thursday late afternoon, and first thing Friday morning Anse would pick it up at the bank here on his way to the plant. One Friday morning, middle of last September, a man with a handkerchief over his face tried to hold him up on the Ridge Road. Anse got away by stepping on the gas. So the next week —"

"Time," murmured Ellery. "As a result of the near holdup, Mr. Wheeler called a council of war that same evening at his home. Who were present at that meeting — in his study, I believe?"

"Anse Wheeler, Mamie, Chief Dakin, me, and my head cashier, Olin Keckley."

"Not Delbert Hood, then."

"He wasn't in the study, no. But he was in the living room reading, and the transom over the door between was wide open. Couldn't have helped but hear the whole thing."

"Delbert was still in the living room when the conference broke up and you left?"

"He was," said Wolfert, "and I'm going to say so on the witness stand under oath."

"At this meeting, it was decided that, unless the masked man were picked up beforehand, the next week Keckley would make up the Wheeler payroll on Wednesday instead of Thursday, and on Wednesday evening he, Keckley, would secretly take the payroll to your home. Mr. Wheeler was to pick it up at your house Thursday morning on his way to the plant. And all this was to be kept top-secret among those present. Is that right, Wolfert?"

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"I know what you're after," grinned Van Horn, "but it wasn't *my* handkerchief that's Exhibit Number One in this case."

"Tell me: Whose suggestion was it that the payroll day be advanced from Friday to Thursday?"

Wolfert started. "What difference does that make?" he demanded suspiciously. "I don't remember, anyhow!"

"Could we have Olin Keckley in here?"

Van Horn's head cashier was a gaunt gray man with a tic and a cringing look. In the days when John F. Wright had owned the bank, Ellery recalled, Keckley had been a pleasant fellow with a forthright eye.

"The suggestion about changing the day?" the cashier repeated, glancing quickly at Wolfert Van Horn. The banker looked bland. "Why, I'm sure I don't remember, Mr. Queen." Wolfert frowned. "Unless," Keckley hurried on, "unless it was me. Yes, I think — in fact, I'm sure it was me made the suggestion."

"Why, Olin, I think it was," said his employer.

"Clever of you, Mr. Keckley." Chief Dakin had told Ellery the suggestion had originated with Wolfert Van Horn. "And the following Wednesday night you dropped off the Wheeler payroll at Mr. Van Horn's house, as planned?"

"Yes, sir."

"The payroll was in the customary canvas bag?"

"Well, no, sir. We figured that since the whole idea was to fool the robber, we ought to wrap the payroll in paper, like an ordinary package. In case," Keckley said earnestly, "the robber was watching the bank, or something like that."

"What kind of paper?"

"Plain brown wrapping paper."

"Sealed?"

"With scotch tape, yes, sir."

"I take it, Mr. Keckley, you didn't discuss the new plan with anyone at all?"

"No, sir! I didn't even let the other tellers see me make up the Wheeler payroll that Wednesday afternoon."

"And I suppose you didn't give any information away, Wolfert," said Ellery when the cashier, perspiring, had left. "I know, I know; don't bother. What time that Thursday morning did Anson Wheeler pick up the payroll at your house?"

"Quarter past 7."

"That early?" Ellery sat up. "And he was going directly to the Ridge Road, to his plant?"

"The plant's work day starts 8 o'clock."

"While the Wrightsville National Bank," murmured Ellery, "doesn't open its doors till 9:30."

He rose suddenly. "Be seeing you, Wolfert!"

Ellery had Ed Hotchkiss drive him up to Hill Valley. At the point where Shingle Street ends and Route 478A turns east to Twin Hill-in-the-Beeches, the Ridge Road begins, bearing north around the heavily for-

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ested hills above Wrightsville and then due west into the Valley.

Ed slowed his taxi down. "This is where the dirty work was done, Mr. Queen. Nothing here but the road and woods, y'see —"

"We'll nose around the scene of the foul deed in due course, Edward. First let's talk to Anse Wheeler."

The Wheeler Company occupied a long low building of blackened brick not far from Wrightsville Airport. It was as ugly a factory as the old machine shop in Low Village, which was Ellery's standard frame of reference. Inside, the building was poorly lighted and even more poorly ventilated, the floors sagged alarmingly under the weight of the heavy machinery, generations of dirt crusted the walls, and the workmen labored in silence. Ellery, who had begun to like Anson Wheeler, decided to dislike him all over again.

He found the owner in a bare, chilly office of scarified golden oak. Wheeler was a tense-looking man of middle age and height, with eyes as pale as his cheeks. His high-pitched voice had a chronic note of resentment in it, almost a whine.

"I know, I know what you're here for, Mr. Queen," he said bitterly. "Van Horn's already phoned me. Well, I consider myself a fair man. I won't have you think I'm persecuting him. But I tell you the boy did it. If I weren't convinced, do you think I'd press this case? I'm — I'm very fond of Mrs. Wheeler. But she's got to see Delbert as he really is. A troublemaker, a thief! It's not the money, Mr. Queen. It's . . . *him.*"

"But suppose, Mr. Wheeler, you found out that Del didn't do it?"

"I'd be a very happy man," said Anse Wheeler with a groan. Then his thin lips tightened. "But he did."

"That first time — the unsuccessful attempt. Did you get a good look at the masked man before you got away?"

"Well, he was sort of tall and thin. There was a silk-looking handkerchief over his face. I was too excited to notice anything else. But later, looking back, I realized it must have been Delbert."

"He was pointing a gun, I believe?"

"Yes. But the boy has a gun. He brought one back with him from Korea."

"He made no attempt to fire after you as you stepped on the gas?"

"I don't know. They didn't find any bullet holes in the car. I almost ran him down. He jumped into a bush."

"You understand, of course, Mr. Wheeler, that it might have been anybody tall and thin . . ."

"You think I'm pinning it on him!" cried Anson Wheeler. "Well, how about that handkerchief? The next Thursday?"

"Tell me about it, Mr. Wheeler," said Ellery sympathetically.

"I picked up my payroll at Wolfert's house early that morning and took the Ridge Road as usual." Wheeler's high voice climbed higher. "There, at almost the same spot as the

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Friday morning before, was a tree across the road. I came on it so unexpectedly around the bend, all I could think to do was jam on my brakes, grab the package of money, and try to run for it . . . He — he hit me. As I got out of my car."

"Del hit you, Mr. Wheeler?" murmured Ellery.

"I didn't actually see him, no. My back was to him. But wait! The whack on my head dazed me only for a second or two — he must have missed where he was aiming. I tried to fight him." Wheeler's pale eyes flashed fire suddenly. "He's a strong boy and he's been in the Army — oh, he knew how to get me! He crooked his arm around my throat from behind, and I was helpless. I reached up and tried to claw at his face. I felt something silky in my fingers and then he hit me on the back of the head again. Next thing I knew Officer Jorking was reviving me. The money was gone, but I'd held on to the handkerchief. *It was Delbert's!*"

"You're positive," said Ellery, "it was his?"

"Had his initials on it! I'd given him that silk pocket handkerchief when I married his mother. I outfitted that boy from head to foot. . . !"

Ellery left Anson K. Wheeler in his grimy office, tight face bloodless and long fingers feeling the back of his head.

Officer Jorking lay in the men's ward at Wrightsville General Hospital, munching disgustedly at a winter apple. His left leg and thigh were buried to the hip in a bulky cast, and he was lying in a maze of traction apparatus.

"I feel like some screwball's invention," said the young policeman out of a deep gloom. "And stuck in this contraption since last September! If they don't give that kid ten years, Mr. Queen, I'll personally break his neck."

"Tough all around, Jeep," mourned Ellery, sitting down beside the hospital bed. "How did it happen?"

Young Jorking spat out an apple pip. "The Ridge Road's part of my beat — I cover the whole district north of town. When Mr. Wheeler was almost held up that first time, Chief Dakin ordered me to keep my eye on him without letting on. So when Wheeler picked up his payroll that morning at Van Horn's on North Hill Drive, I was tailing him in my prowl-car.

"He turned into Ridge Road, me staying far enough back so I won't make Wheeler suspicious. I didn't come around the bend of the road till it was all over — that's how the kid got away from me. Wheeler was stretched out cold, blood streaming from his head, and a skinny tall figure was just diving into the woods to the east of the road."

"To the east?"

"Yes, sir. I fired a couple of snap shots in his direction, but I didn't hit anything, and by the time I'd pulled up where he'd gone for cover, there wasn't a sign of him. So I reported to

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headquarters on my two-way radio and took care of Mr. Wheeler. He wasn't dead, wasn't even hurt bad.

"The first thing I spotted was that silk handkerchief in his hand, with the initials *DH*. Every buck in town knew that handkerchief — it was the first silk one young Del'd ever owned, and he kept showing it off — so I knew right away who it had been."

"How did he break your hip?" asked Ellery.

"I broke it going after him." The young officer spat out another pip. "Del walked into the house quite a while after I got Mr. Wheeler home. The kid was sort of scratched up and his clothes were full of bits of twig and thorn. He said he'd been tramping through the woods. I told him what happened, showed him his hanky, and said I'd have to pull him in. Darned if he didn't take off! — jumped clean through a window. I chased him along the edge of that ravine behind the Wheeler house, and that's how I came to bust my hip. Tripped over a root and fell smack into the ravine. It's a wonder I didn't break my back. . . . It was Del packed me out of there. Seems he saw me tumble in and decided to turn Boy Scout."

Young Jorking scowled at his mummified left foot and flung the apple core at it. "Ah, it's a crazy mixed-up kind of case, Mr. Queen. I wish I didn't have to testify."

So then Ellery went over to police headquarters and sat down in Chief Dakin's swivel chair near the picture of J. Edgar Hoover, and he said, "Mind if I mull over this for a while?"

"Mull away," grunted Dakin. The chief stood at his window studying State Street.

Finally Ellery said, "My muller seems out of order. Did you *consider* any other possibilities, Dakin?"

"Like fury," said the chief of police, not unkindly. "But who would you have me pin it on? The only other ones who knew about that switch in payroll days were Wheeler himself, Mamie, Wolfert Van Horn, and Olin Keckley.

"Wolf Van Horn might have done it, sure, if there were a million or two involved. But I can't see him risking the Pen at his age for a measly fifteen thousand — not with all the money he's got. Keckley? A man like Olin might help himself from the till under certain circumstances, but armed robbery? masks? hitting folks over the head? jumping into bushes?" The chief shook his head. "Not Olin. He'd faint dead away first."

"Then one of them must have blabbed!"

"Could be. Only they all say they didn't."

"Damn!" Ellery gnawed on a knuckle. "About the payroll, Dakin. You never found any part of it?"

"Nary a dime."

"Where'd you look?"

"We searched the Wheeler house and grounds, and just about every other place in and out of town where young Del's known to hang around. He's got it hid somewhere, of course.

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Probably hid it right after the holdup."

"Did you search the woods?"

"Near the scene, on the theory that the robber might have dropped it when Jorking chased him, or hid it as part of a plan? Yep," said Chief Dakin, "we searched those woods east of the road with a fine-tooth comb, Mr. Queen."

"Only east of the road?"

Dakin stared. "That's the direction the robber took when he lit out."

"But why not west, too? He might have doubled back across the road somewhere out of Jeep's view!"

Dakin shook his head. "You're wasting your time, Mr. Queen. Supposing you even found the money. That'd be fine for Anse Wheeler, but how would it help get young Del off?"

"It's a loose end," said Ellery irritably. "You never know how a loose end ties in, Dakin. And anyway, I've covered everything else. Come on, you're going to search with me."

They found the stolen Wheeler payroll in the woods not fifty yards west of the Ridge Road, on a due line from the spot where Anson Wheeler had been held up the preceding September.

Chief Dakin was chagrined. "I feel like a dummy!"

"Needn't," said Ellery, intent, on his knees. "Last fall these woods were in full foliage, and to have found anything like this would have constituted an act of God. In January, with the trees stripped bare and the ground clear, it's a different boiler of bass."

The package of money had been buried in a shallow pit at the base of a tree. But rains and winds had torn away the thin covering of dirt and leaf mold, and both men had spotted the package at the same time, bulging soddenly out of the earth.

Nature had been unkind to Anson Wheeler's payroll. The brown paper in which it was wrapped had disintegrated under the action of soil and elements. Small animals and birds had evidently gnawed at the rotting, mildewed, moldy bills. Insects had contributed to the wreckage. Most of the paper money was in unrecognizable, fused lumps and shreds.

"If there's two thousand dollars in salvage left," muttered Wrightsville's chief of police, "Anse is in luck. Only there ain't."

"It was that awfully hot Indian summer and this mild winter," murmured Ellery. "Most of the damage was done before the ground hardened." Ellery got to his feet. "Fortunately."

"For who?"

"For Del Hood. This mass of corruption is going to keep young Delbert out of jail."

"What!"

"Up to now I've only hoped the boy was innocent. Now I know it."

Chief Dakin stared at him. Then, bewilderedly, he squatted to examine the remains of the payroll, as if he had missed a clue buried in it somewhere.

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"But I don't see —!"

"Later, Dakin. Right now we'd better gather this filth up. It's evidence!"

When everyone was arranged to Ellery's satisfaction, he looked about him and he said, "This one has the beautiful merit of simplicity.

"Look. Robber assaults Mr. Wheeler on the Ridge Road, snatches the payroll in its paper wrappings, and shortly thereafter buries the package in a shallow pit in the woods not fifty yards from the scene of the robbery. This is last September I'm talking about.

"Now, a robber who buries his loot immediately after he's stolen it either intends it as a temporary cache — till the first hue-and-cry blows over — or as a long-term hiding place . . . till the case is practically forgotten, say, or till he's served a prison term.

"Did our robber mean that hole in the woods to be the hiding place of his loot for a short time or a long time?

"For a short time," said Ellery, answering himself, "obviously. No robber in his right mind would take fifteen thousand dollars in paper money, wrapped in paper wrappings, and bury it for any length of time. If he had the sense he was born with he'd know what he'd find when he came back — what, in fact, Chief Dakin and I did find — a soggy, eaten-up, chewed-away, disintegrated wad of valueless pulp. For a long-time burial, he'd have provided himself with a weather-resistant container of some sort, of metal or at least of heavy wood.

"Our robber, then, had no long-term view in mind. By burying the payroll in its perishable paper wrappings — in a shallow hole — he tells us that he intended it to lie there for a very short time. Perhaps only for hours, or at the most, days.

"But as it turns out, *he left it there for almost five months* — until, as you see, it was practically destroyed. I ask the reasonable question: Why, after planning to retrieve it in a short time, did he leave it there to rot? Certainly at some period in the past five months it must have been perfectly safe for him to dig it up. In fact, he would have been safe any time after the first few days. Nobody's been shadowed in this case — not even Del, out on bail. And the spot is a lonely one, well off the road in the woods. So again I ask: Why didn't the robber come back for his loot? To spend it, or to transfer it to another hiding place, or to repackage it if for no other reason?"

Ellery grinned without much humor. He said simply: "If he didn't come back for the payroll when there was every reason for him to do so, and with no risk, then logically it can only have been because he *couldn't* come back. And that's why I've had you wheeled into this private room," Ellery said, turning to the young policeman trussed up in the hospital bed, "so you could face the man you've victimized and the woman you've crucified and the boy you've tried to

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throw to the dogs, Jeep — yes, and the honest cop who trained you and trusted you and who's looking at you now and seeing you, I'm sure, really for the first time.

"You're the only one involved, Jorking, who physically could not get back to that cache in the woods.

"You learned about the change in the payroll day through Chief Dakin, who assigned you to the job of tailing Mr. Wheeler in your prowl-car. But you didn't tail Mr. Wheeler in your prowl-car that morning, Jorking — you were already on your selected site, as you had been the week before, lurking behind your ambush, your police car hidden off the road.

"You assaulted Mr. Wheeler from behind and you saw to it that Del's silk handkerchief — it was easy enough for you to get it, once you decided to frame Del — remained in Mr. Wheeler's grip. If he hadn't ripped the handkerchief off your face you would have left it in or near his hand. And while he was still unconscious, you darted into the woods to the west and hastily buried the package of money — because you were playing two roles at the moment and time was precious just then — intending to come back for the money later in the day, or the next day, when the coast would be clear. But after taking Mr. Wheeler back to his home and solemnly arresting Delbert for the crime you had committed, the boy bolted, you had to chase him, you accidently broke your hip, and they rushed you to the hospital where you've been immobilized ever since! You're not only a thief, Jeep, you're a disgrace to an undervalued profession, and I'm going to hang around Wrightsville long enough to see you immobilized in the clink."

When Ellery turned from the frozen man in the bed, he realized that he was — in a queer sense — quite alone. Chief Dakin was facing the wall. Mamie Hood Wheeler sat crying joyfully in a sphere of her own. And above her Anse Wheeler, so pale with excitement that he was sky-blue, thumped Del Hood repeatedly on the back, and Del Hood, with a wild friendliness, was giving his stepfather thump for thump.

So Ellery went away, quietly.

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EQMM's DETECTIVE DIRECTORY

edited by ROBERT P. MILLS

GO, LOVELY ROSE *by JEAN POTTS* (SCRIBNERS, $2.75)	". . . exceptionally fine mystery novel. A-1, marvellous entertainment." (FC)	". . . whole job is well done and makes vivid reading. Atmosphere plus." (EW)
THE WATCHER AT THE DOOR *by GEOFFREY HOLIDAY HALL* (SIMON & SCHUSTER, $2.50)	". . . well above average and highly recommended." (FC)	". . . chillingly atmospheric but ultimately disappointing . . . Up and down." (AdV)
DEAD MAN'S SHOES *by MICHAEL INNES* (DODD, MEAD, $2.75)	". . . 23 smart bits of detection . . ." (LGO)	". . . drollery and charm . . . every one has something to recommend it." (H-M)
DEAD AND NOT BURIED *by H. F. M. PRESCOTT* (MACMILLAN, $2.50)	". . . more suspense than you'd expect . . . worthy 'revisited' item from 1938." (LGO)	". . . handling of the situation is . . . masterful . . . Topflight." (AdV)
THE MOON GATE *by CAROLL COX ESTES* (CRIME CLUB, $2.75)	". . . a lively story . . . Unusual, excellent entertainment." (FC)	". . . a lively story which competently engages the reader's sympathies." (AdV)
THIN AIR *by HOWARD BROWNE* (SIMON & SCHUSTER, $2.50)	". . . sophisticated, tough, full of action . . ." (FC)	". . . considerable suspense. Well done, intelligent job all the way." (AdV)
MADE FOR MURDER *by FENN MCGREW* (RINEHART, $2.50)	". . . less a suspense item than a novel about the troubles of a family." (LGO)	"Wonderful college town atmosphere . . . literate and sophisticated writing. Cheers." (AdV)
THE CASE OF THE SILKEN PETTICOAT *by CHRISTOPHER BUSH* (MACMILLAN, $2.50)	"Neither surprising nor urgent . . . B minus." (LGO)	"Amiable enough, but nothing special by way of plot or people. Slow walk." (EW)

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Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine rounds up the judgment of reviewers across the country. The key on the right gives sources.

"On the populous side, but handling is deft, sympathetic." (SC)	". . . brightly amusing, touchingly sensitive and always highly readable." (AB)
"Lacks action in spots, but pleasant travelogue. Worthwhile." (SC)	". . . a whale of a story, rich and wonderfully written . . ." (DBH)
"Yarns range from 1,300 to 13,000 words; literary allusions abound. Highly mannered." (SC)	". . . glitters with his accustomed wit, ingenuity and allusive erudition." (AB)
"We can both guarantee that if you miss the gimmick you will enjoy a feeling of long-drawn suspense." (H-M)	". . . great talent . . . fine plot will keep the reader enthralled until the very end." (FP)
"Heavily complicated dirty work for a fortune." (DD)	". . . exciting . . . a good, sound story." (DBH)
". . . few readers will put the book down . . . ending is slightly forced." (H-M)	". . . will keep you on the edge of your chair from opening to finale." (DBH)
"One of those family jobs. Characterization is sharp. Plus mark." (SC)	". . . the pungent bouquet of the mystery vintage of 1954 . . . Refreshing." (H-M)
". . . yarn among author's best. Holds up all the way." (SC)	"The best in mystery writing and detection." (FP)

KEY TO REVIEW SOURCES

AB: *Anthony Boucher in the New York Times*

FC: *Frances Crane in the Evansville Press*

SC: *Sergeant Cuff in The Saturday Review*

DD: *Drexel Drake in the Chicago Tribune*

H-M: *Brett Halliday and Helen McCloy in the Fairfield County Fair*

DBH: *Dorothy B. Hughes in the Albuquerque Tribune*

LGO: *Lenore Glen Offord in the San Francisco Chronicle*

FP: *Fay Profilet in the Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*

AdV: *Avis de Voto in the Boston Globe*

EW: *Elizabeth Watt in the Boston Globe*

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NONE SO BLIND

Two of the most important books of detective short stories published in the decade of the Renaissance (1941-1950) — two contemporary classics — are Roy Vickers's collections of "inverted" detective tales. The first was titled THE DEPARTMENT OF DEAD ENDS, *and was issued in 1947 by The American Mercury as a 25-cent paperback. This first edition contained seven stories. Two years later, in 1949, Faber and Faber of London published the British edition of* THE DEPARTMENT OF DEAD ENDS*; this volume contained ten stories, only three of which had been included in the earlier American edition.*

The second book of Roy Vickers's "inverted" detective stories was also published by Faber and Faber; it appeared in 1950, and was titled MURDER WILL OUT. *This collection picked up two more of the tales originally included in the American first edition, and added seven more. (A third and equally important volume of Mr. Vickers's "inversions" —* EIGHT MURDERS IN THE SUBURBS *— was published earlier this year in London, by Herbert Jenkins.)*

Now, look at the record: the first two volumes were sensational triumphs in England — indeed, we don't recall a book of detective short stories which received such critical acclaim. Typical of the "raves" were adjectives like "outstanding," "brilliant," and "perfect." The "Manchester Evening News" said unequivocally that THE DEPARTMENT OF DEAD ENDS *is "one of the half-dozen successful books of detective short stories published since the days of Sherlock Holmes." In America, there is not a single critic or connoisseur we know of who has not rated Mr. Vickers's "inverted" tales of detection the very finest of their kind being written today.*

Yet, outside the paperback edition of 1947 (now long out of print) and a reprint of the British edition of THE DEPARTMENT OF DEAD ENDS *issued by the Detective Book Club (available only to subscribers), none of Mr. Vickers's books of shorts has been brought out by an American publisher in a regular trade-edition. How explain this singular blind-spot on the part of American publishers? Frankly, we can't. We know the prejudice that exists, and has existed for a long time, against volumes of short stories; we know, too, that collections of short stories do not as a general rule sell well. But there are exceptions to every rule. Roy Vickers's "inverted" detective stories are, individually and even more so as a group, the criminological cream; they are topdrawer, topnotch, and topflight 'tecs, and,*

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moreover, they have an already established reading public. Why, then, no cloth-bound edition in America?

Well, perhaps one day an American publisher will "discover" the saga of the Department of Dead Ends — discover their quality, their fascination, and inevitably, their sales possibilities. In the meantime, we'll keep bringing you Roy Vickers's superb studies in criminal psychology and realistic detection — an EQMM exclusive of which we are inordinately proud.

NINE TO ONE YOU'LL HANG

by ROY VICKERS

IT HAS BEEN NOTED BEFORE THAT murder by means of poison in a cocktail glass has a distorting effect on the public imagination — even the police will play parlor games with the glasses. In the Chermouth case there were three cocktail glasses, one loaded with the poison, on a small circular tray. Circular tray! Turn the tray by accident or design and the three glasses will produce eighteen theories. Still more theories can be pinned on the guess that the murderer, "adroitly diverting the attention of his victim," switches the glasses — which includes the intriguing possibility that he may be so muddled by the circularity of the tray that he bumps himself off!

There was no switching of glasses — no "adroitness" by anybody — in the Chermouth case. None of the stock theories fitted, because it was not a stock kind of murder.

It occurred at twenty-three minutes past 7 on a Monday evening in April. The time, like nearly every other relevant fact, was fixed by Miss Humby, an eye-witness who saved the police mountains of work.

Gladys Humby, though not quite 30, was an active, dumpy little spinster, with an active, dumpy little mind. Clever people cannot predict what will interest a fool. No clever or intelligent person, completely unaware that a murder was in the course of being committed, would have observed all the small actions of everybody around her. But Miss Humby, being what she was, rarely observed anything else.

Chermouth, some twenty miles out of London, was hardly more than an overgrown village. The residents were sociable and informal and knew each other's affairs. Thus it was known that on most Monday evenings during the winter, Miss Humby dined with the Esdales and Lyle Brocker, to make a fourth at bridge.

At a quarter to 7, Miss Humby entered the front garden of The

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Bines. It was a prematurely warm evening and she was *so* pleased that the French windows of the sitting room were open because it was a sign that summer had almost come. It was an early Victorian house. The young Esdales had removed the folding doors between the one-time dining and drawing rooms, thereby making one long room. Miss Humby approached the window.

"May I come in?" she called. "Or must I ring the bell like a perfect lady?"

A moment later she saw that the room contained only her fellow guest, Lyle Brocker. He was coming towards her from the dining-room end.

"Hullo, Gladys! Joan has just rushed upstairs — George knocked something over, I think. Give 'em a few minutes, then we'll organize a rescue party."

"I wonder what he knocked over, but I expect they'll tell us. . . . I see they've bought *River Yachting* too." It was one of those very large, flat books that are virtually albums, and it was lying on top of the radio console. "Oh, but it's your copy! Joan will spill things on it. . . . I must just take a peep at their primulas." She was moving towards the windows, of identical pattern, at the other end of the room. "Ours have been terribly disappointing."

Lyle Brocker never took any notice of her when she chattered — and little enough at any other time. When they were in their late 'teens she had been a bit of a nuisance, but nowadays he felt only compassion for a girl who had lost her way in life.

Brocker, dark, large, but nimble, was a metallurgist, a coming man in the firm that employed him. To Miss Humby, he was a fairy prince, scaled down to marriageable proportions. She knew there were those who saw him as a wistful figure, deemed to be nursing a secret sorrow, in that he had once been engaged to Joan, whom he had known since they were children. That was three years ago. Miss Humby was sure it couldn't have meant much because, within a year, Joan had married George Esdale, a barrister who was already making his mark. She would not call George handsome, though he was kind — and very clever, people said.

A few minutes after Miss Humby's arrival, at exactly nine minutes to 7, Joan Esdale appeared, pattering over her shoulder to her husband, who presently joined her in the doorway.

"Sorry, Gladys. George felt he had to try his brute strength on the medicine cabinet, and smashed everything. By the way he bellowed, I thought he had hurt himself."

"I wasn't bellowing — I was only swearing. At you, dear, for shifting the thing without warning me."

Thus the evening began — and continued for the next twenty minutes — like any other evening, anywhere, when familiar friends gather to pass time. There were the same banalities, the same elaboration of trivial incidents, the slight fussing to promote sociability.

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Miss Humby derived pleasure from the fact that Joan was wearing her violet semi-evening gown, of the same hue as her eyes. She thought that Joan was very lovely but that she was beginning to lose her looks, which was a bad sign at 27. She was certainly thinner than she used to be and there were times, of late, when she had looked nearly haggard. She had also observed that George Esdale and Lyle Brocker were both afflicted with stigmata of advancing years, though both were of the same age as herself. She did not allow herself to draw any inference from these observations.

The chatter was general until the two men slipped into a political discussion. At two minutes to 7, Joan got up to mix the drinks and Miss Humby followed her into the dining-room half of the room — part of the ritual of every Monday evening.

On their left was the dining table, laid and covered with muslin by the daily help, who left at 5. Against the wall on their right was the sideboard, and between the two, at the far end of the room, were a second pair of French windows giving onto the garden at the rear of the house. The sideboard, of the same period as the house, contained two cupboards, a table-board some five feet in length, and a bay for a spirit tantalus which rested between two smaller cupboards for cigars and liqueurs. Laid in readiness on the table-board were four coffee cups, a glass percolator, a bottle of gin, and a bottle of vermouth; the latter two were about three-quarters full. Beside the two bottles was the small circular tray on which stood the three cocktail glasses.

When the two women approached the sideboard, one of the three glasses — it was contended — already contained the poison, in the form of approximately half a teaspoon of a liquid which is colorless and odorless. It was possible, therefore, that Joan was ignorant of the presence of the poison.

"Break the rule of a lifetime, Gladys, and have a drink," invited Joan.

"No, thank you, dear." Miss Humby meticulously adjusted the box of matches which was half out of its clip on the pedestal of the percolator. "I was persuaded to drink gin once and I felt awful afterwards. They say smoking — at least, you two don't smoke! — smoking and drinking alcohol make you old before your time. I wonder you can take the dreadful stuff."

"I don't drink very much," said Joan. "Only half as much as I give the men — I fill up with vermouth."

She poured a small tot of gin into one of the glasses.

"There! Even that is a little more than I generally take."

She added vermouth, then filled the other two glasses.

"They all look the same," said Miss Humby. "How do you tell yours from the others?"

"Mine's the one nearest to me." Joan picked up the tray and Miss Humby noticed that Joan's thumb

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was nearest to the glass in which she had put the short tot of gin.

"It's getting chilly," remarked Joan. She raised her voice. "Geo-orge! Shut the big windows, darling! We'll have the little ones open at each end. I'll do this one."

Joan put the circular tray back on the sideboard, then went to the window and opened the small panel in the larger pane. When she returned, the sideboard was on her left. She picked up the circular tray with her left hand, which was nearer.

There was a sharp draught between the panels at opposite ends of the long room. Miss Humby shivered elaborately — she lived in fear of draughts.

"I fancy George will want to cry off bridge next week," Joan said. "He likes to potter about with a trowel at the first sign of summer."

"Just what I was going to suggest, dear," said Miss Humby, noticing that Joan had changed the tray back to her right hand while she was speaking and that her thumb was not nearer one glass than another.

Lyle Brocker was sitting in the armchair near the window. George was wandering about the room. Lyle got up as Joan approached. He took a glass from the tray, then sank back into the armchair.

Joan always sat in a corner of the settee. As George was still wandering, she put a glass for herself on the radio cabinet, within arm's reach of the settee. Actually, she put the glass on top of Lyle Brocker's copy of *River Yachting*. Then she crossed the room and placed the tray — on which there was now only one glass — on the bookcase, for her husband.

While Joan was at the bookcase Miss Humby removed *River Yachting* from under the cocktail glass and pointedly put the book on Lyle's knee. Then, after noting that she and Joan had taken four minutes while mixing the drinks, she sat beside Joan on the settee.

George, after shutting the panel at the far end of the room, came back, in the direction of the bookcase.

Suddenly, Miss Humby thought of something.

"Joan! You didn't keep track of your glass," she said. "You changed hands twice."

"*Did* she!" exclaimed George. "If I've got hers, I'm entitled to another to keep pace with Lyle. We'll soon see!"

George took the glass from the tray on the bookcase and drank the whole of the contents. This mild clowning amused Miss Humby. Later, of course, it became extremely important evidence. It raised the question: If George had known that one of the glasses contained poison, would he not have waited, before drinking, until the first symptom of poisoning appeared in his victim?

"That seemed strong enough," he said, and glanced at Lyle, who was talking to Joan. Lyle's glass remained untouched on the occasional table. It was now five minutes past 7.

"I may as well tell you, Gladys," said George, "that you're getting the

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same meal as you had last Monday. The difference is that it's my turn to heat up the soup. How do you like your soup heated?"

"If you're nervous about it, I'll come and help you," tittered Miss Humby.

"No, thank you. You can help by seeing that they don't take too long over their drinks. I know the soup oughtn't to boil."

Joan, Miss Humby happened to know, always made soup from stock, so there would be no tins to be opened. It would take about four minutes to heat enough soup for four persons. Six minutes past 7. She checked the clock by her wrist watch which had been checked an hour ago by radio. Six past 7 on the dot. It was silly of George to tell her to hurry the others over their drinks. How could she?

Besides, Joan had already taken two sips and was keeping the glass in her hand. Lyle had taken up his glass but had put it down again untouched while he explained to Joan something about the river rising on the Spring tide. They were both looking solemnly at each other as if it were frightfully important, which it couldn't possibly be.

At twelve minutes past 7, Joan also glanced at the clock, then took quite a big sip. She swirled the liquid as if she thought it hadn't mixed properly, then took another big sip which left her glass practically empty. She put the glass back on the radio.

"You are wrong in supposing that the wind can have little or no effect on the flood tide." They might almost have been quarreling about it. And then — strangely enough, thought Miss Humby — Lyle picked up his glass and again put it down without drinking, because he seemed so worked up about the wind and the tide.

Joan touched Miss Humby's arm.

"It's getting frightfully hot in here. I think we'd better have the big windows open again."

"I'll do it," said Lyle. As he rose, he took up his glass, drank half the contents, and then continued talking, while he opened the French windows: "The north wind piles up the seas in the bottleneck of Dover and Calais —"

"I'm boiling hot," cried Joan. "There must be something wrong with that vermouth — don't drink it, Lyle!"

"There can't be — mine tasted all right." The next moment he was at her side, holding her in his arms. "Joan darling, what is the matter with you?"

"I can't breathe — I must have air — I'm frightfully ill!"

He laid her full length on the settee. He shouted for George, then rushed out through the windows for Dr. Blagrove, knowing it would be quicker than telephoning.

It was exactly twenty-two minutes past 7.

"Gladys!"

"Yes, darling. Dr. Blagrove will be here in a minute . . . Hold on to me if it helps."

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"Gladys, listen to me!"

The physical circumstances of the next 30 seconds are unimportant. Speech was blurred and irregular, but Miss Humby was able to hear and later to report as if the words had been uttered continuously. The words were repetitive. Soon they ceased altogether.

Presently, Miss Humby became aware that George had come into the room and that he was supporting her to a chair. She was crying but was able to observe George, who exhibited nothing but bewilderment.

"George! Did you hear what she said?"

"No. When I came in she was — like that."

"She said she had put poison in her drink. She said she meant to kill herself. She kept repeating it."

"It may be true," said George.

Dr. Blagrove came in through the French windows, followed by Lyle Brocker. George looked past Blagrove as if he were not present and spoke to Lyle.

"Joan told Gladys she put poison in her glass because she wanted to kill herself."

"I thought of that while I was fetching Blagrove," said Lyle. "I wonder . . ."

Within forty minutes of Joan Esdale's death, Colonel Maenmore, the Chief Constable of the county, arrived and received Inspector Rouse's report, covering routine.

"The three glasses were identified unanimously by the three survivors. There was enough left in each for analysis, but Dr. Blagrove says that, from the symptoms, he's certain it was — eczymo-something — it's here in the medical report, sir."

"That means plenty of leg work for your men." Maenmore had read the report. "Worse than weed-killer or fly papers to trace. What do they call the commercial stuff? — *KILFLY*. Three-ounce bottles in every grocer's and oilshop in the country. From half a gallon of it, anybody can distil a fatal dose — as little as five drops."

"Yes, sir. I've asked the three of 'em to wait in a bedroom upstairs." They were speaking in the morning room, on the opposite side of the corridor, which George Esdale had offered. "They're all fully cooperative." He lowered his voice: "You might like to see that Miss Humby first, sir. She's very useful — the Nosey Parker miss."

"Put her in this room, while I have a look round."

The technical men had nearly finished. He gave permission for the body to be taken to the mortuary.

Maenmore had the physique of a retired army officer, with the face of an amiable scholar. Though he had served successfully for ten years in the military police, the civil force regarded him as something of an armchair amateur — a belief which Maenmore himself encouraged.

In a couple of minutes he realized that Miss Humby was a policeman's dream come true. He cut his questions and invited her to give him a full

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account of everything, beginning with her own arrival at the house. Miss Humby took him at his word. The result was the next best thing to a talking film of the whole incident.

From Brocker, whom he saw next, he received a report which dovetailed with that of Miss Humby.

"When Miss Humby arrived, you were alone in the room. Where were you actually sitting?"

"I was at the dining-room end, at the sideboard, when I heard her voice in the garden. I had run short of matches and I knew they kept the only box of matches in the house on a little clip in the coffee percolator, which works on a spirit lamp."

"An unfortunate spot, in the circumstances," remarked Maenmore. "Why is it the only box in the house?"

"They have an electric cooker and they don't smoke," said Brocker, patiently. "Esdale does jury work and he's as careful about his voice as a singer."

"So you went to the sideboard, lit a cigarette —"

"I smoke a pipe — that's why I don't carry a lighter. I took half the contents of the match box and put them in my own empty box — I know the Esdales very well."

"You were heard to express the opinion that deceased had committed suicide, Mr. Brocker?"

"I admit that was my idea, at first." Brocker stroked his chin. "But I can't see how she worked it. She did not put anything in her glass after she came along with the tray. Besides, if she intended to commit suicide she wouldn't do it in such a way that she might kill somebody else instead. As it was, any one of us might have swallowed that poison — except Miss Humby."

Maenmore was holding his fire. It would be idle to ask Brocker why he had not touched his drink until Mrs. Esdale had revealed the first symptom of poisoning — alternatively, why he did not believe her when she warned him that there was "something wrong with that vermouth."

Before sending for Esdale, Maenmore went to the sideboard in the main room. The bottles had been removed for analysis, but the coffee outfit was untouched. Fitted to the supporting column of the percolator was a clip for holding the standard-size box of safety matches.

There was no box of matches in the clip.

Brocker had stated specifically that he had taken half the matches from the box, implying that he had left the box itself still there. That, Maenmore reflected, was the sort of irritating trifle that so often caused a lot of work for nothing.

Now for the husband . . .

The principle that, when a wife has been murdered, the husband is the first suspect could hardly be applied. The husband had been the first to drink — and he had drained his glass at a gulp.

When George Esdale presented himself, Maenmore spoke gently, as to a stricken man, while taking him

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over the now familiar ground. He soon perceived that restraint would be unnecessary. The deceased woman was not lamented. Miss Humby, her intimate friend, had shown only a reporter's concern. Brocker had been convincing as an interested spectator. The husband was taking his wife's death as a problem of human conduct.

"So, as soon as the drinks had been handed round you finished yours quickly and left the room. Will you tell me exactly what you did between then and the moment when you re-entered the sitting room?"

"I went from the sitting room to the kitchen and put up a saucepan of soup to heat. I stayed there until Brocker shouted."

"But you did not come at once?"

"Almost at once. At first I was not certain I had heard the shout. A little later I came to the conclusion that it must have been a shout and that it was my name."

"I'd like to get these small things buttoned up," said Maenmore. "If you don't mind, we'll check on that shout. Shall we go to the kitchen?"

Maenmore told Bissett to ask Brocker to cooperate. When Esdale opened the door of the kitchen there was an unpleasant smell, not a little smoke, and a mess on the electric cooker. The soup had boiled over; what was left had evaporated and the bottom of the saucepan was red-hot.

"Good lord, I forgot all about it!" Esdale turned the switch. Maenmore shut the kitchen door. Presently from the sitting room Brocker's voice was most distinctly heard calling, "George."

"That's unmistakable," said Esdale. "I suppose I was wool-gathering."

Back in the morning room, Maenmore elicited that it was George Esdale who had taken the bottles of vermouth and gin and the three glasses from the cupboard, as soon as he arrived home.

"When the glasses were in the cupboard," asked Maenmore, "were they right side up?"

"No. Upside down — I suppose to keep the dust out."

That eliminated the daily help and prepared the way for the pivotal question.

"Mr. Esdale, do you believe your wife committed suicide?"

"I can't make up my mind. Apparently she said so — and when Miss Humby told me, I thought it might be true. Since then, I've been wondering whether Miss Humby might possibly have misunderstood what my wife did say."

"Miss Humby was very definite."

"She always is," smiled Esdale. "She was also definite in explaining how my wife had done this and that with the tray, so there was no telling one glass from another. That doesn't match with the statement that Joan knew one of the glasses contained poison."

The Chief Constable reminded himself that this man was a lawyer and would know the rules of evidence. Even so, he had misstated the facts.

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"Miss Humby reports only the fact that your wife *said* she poisoned herself. Her statement to Miss Humby may have been a gallant lie. She realized that she had been poisoned. Assume that she suspected the poisoner was a man she loved and that she wished to forego vengeance. Women have behaved like that before."

"Y-yes. That's a feasible theory of what might have been in her mind. She assumed I had poisoned her."

"Had she any reason for such a suspicion?"

"She had as much and as little reason as I have to suspect that it was she who tried to poison me. You realize, Colonel, that there's just as strong and just as weak a case that way round?"

There was a long silence.

"Keep going, Mr. Esdale. I've been waiting for you to mention Brocker as potential murderer. It'll work 'that way round' too, won't it?"

"You can nominate Brocker. And I can suggest Miss Humby. You seem to want my view of the case. Here it is. That poison got into that glass by blind chance, or it was put in by one of the *four* of us for the purpose of suicide or murder. Take any one of us as the hypothetical murderer and you get absurdity. Miss Humby issues a public warning that the glasses have been mixed up. What is the hypothetical murderer's next move? Obviously to prevent the other two from drinking — no matter how! Anything would be preferable to the risk of being hanged for murdering the wrong person. But the hypothetical murderer made no move at all. He — or she — sits like a ninny saying, 'Bless my soul! The wrong person may be killed. There's one chance in three it will be me, so I won't touch my glass until somebody else starts dying.' It just couldn't happen like that!"

But part of it had happened like that. In sketching an absurdity, Esdale had described what Brocker had actually done.

"Murderers rarely behave consistently. Ignoring reasonableness of behavior, can you suggest any motive?"

"Ignoring reasonableness of behavior," echoed Esdale, "I can supply motives for two. My wife and myself. Our marriage was not a success. There was no cat-and-dog element. But — in a subtle sort of way — we stood in each other's light."

In a dozen sentences George Esdale gave the history of his marriage — truthful, as far as it went. But there are some things which not even a policeman expects a man to say about his wife. . . .

If Joan Barnaby had been predatory, shallow, and cruel, she would probably have done little harm to anybody. By a simple paradox, it was her ingrained honesty, her kindliness and integrity, that made her father's home life thoroughly uncomfortable, that frustrated a handful of admirers, and that completely wrecked her very promising marriage.

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She was possessed of a vital turbulence which would infect others when she was herself disturbed, though men not attuned to her saw only a good-looking girl who could be very lively when she chose. She had a lithe body, of irreproachable outline, dark hair, near-violet eyes, and a profile that made photographers think well of themselves.

Her mother died when Joan was five, leaving the child an income sufficient — as Joan discovered before she was twelve — to pay her boarding-school fees.

At the time of Mrs. Barnaby's death, Gladys Humby elected herself Big Sister to give solace and practical guidance. Joan never forgot her debt of friendship, though as adults she and Gladys had little in common.

At eighteen, Joan went up to Cambridge. At twenty, she joined a repertory company as an amateur. She had a small talent, but lacked the passionate desire for a career. For three years she worked and idled at various arts, crafts, and sports until the day when Gladys Humby made an extremely personal confidence. It was all very arch and indefinite, but the upshot was that Gladys was deeply interested in Lyle Brocker, with whom Joan was on tomboyish, cousinly terms. Joan made the right answers, while inwardly she felt only pity for poor Gladys, who was already a predestined spinster but didn't know it.

Ten days later, Joan made the sudden discovery that she herself had been in love with Lyle Brocker all her life. She was unaware of the magnetic nature of her own disturbances and therefore honestly believed it to be sheer coincidence when he proposed to her at their next meeting.

Her engagement to Lyle, announced in April, was warmly approved by her father and by all concerned — with the negligible exception of Gladys Humby, whose reactions Joan failed to consider important.

The engagement lasted six weeks, then foundered on an episode involving Lyle Brocker and a redheaded beauty employed as a secretary in his firm. Shortly afterwards, Lyle was transferred, at his own request, to the Amsterdam branch.

Joan did not seem to suffer. She stated what she honestly believed to be her position when her father ventured to console her.

"There's nothing in it, Daddy. People change, and I'm one of those who change with a bang instead of gradually. It isn't a 'knock' for me, as you seem to think."

It had been a knock for Captain Barnaby. His affection for his daughter did not obscure the truth that she was self-centered, even though she was not selfish. She was egotistical, even though she was not conceited. A husband, he thought, would manage that sort of thing much better than a father.

George Esdale lived in London, but in Chermouth he had a resident aunt who made herself useful. It was

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again April when Esdale felt he had waited long enough.

"I will not press you for an answer to this question." It was the kind of thing he said in court, so it made him feel safe. "Have you forgotten Brocker?"

"Yes — except as an event. It was the afterglow of a childish adoration. I don't regret it — it made me realize that part of me was a sentimental fake. I changed — with a bang — and became myself."

George and Joan were married in June, Gladys Humby being chief bridesmaid. Joan's father — for the second time warmly approving his daughter's engagement — presented them with his house and went to live with his widowed sister in Hampstead.

Joan didn't "adore" George Esdale, but she loved him and enjoyed his companionship, which was richer than that of Lyle Brocker, and more understanding. They were wholly happy for two years.

Then, a few days after their second anniversary, Joan mentioned to George: "I've just heard that Lyle — Lyle Brocker, of course! — has been transferred back to London. He'll be living with his people, as he did before. It's that Georgian house up the road, with the big cedars. There's no need for any of us to be self-conscious, is there?"

"I've no feeling about it, if you haven't."

"I've none at all. And I'd hate to be stand-offish with Lyle — I still call his father 'Uncle Arthur.' "

A week later, Joan and Lyle met and greeted each other boisterously, which was natural enough since they had been honorary cousins from childhood. The Esdales went to dinner with the Brockers, father and son. No one was ill at ease about anything.

Often, Lyle and George would meet on the train, or give each other a lift. They discovered common interests. A friend of Brocker's had a small yacht, and the Esdales would make up a party of four, sailing on the Thames. George persuaded Lyle to take up golf seriously.

One night in October, when Lyle Brocker came to dinner, Gladys Humby, their fourth at bridge, failed them at the last minute. After dinner, George Esdale was called to the telephone and was absent for about ten minutes. Shortly afterwards Lyle took a rather abrupt departure.

"Washout!" exclaimed George. "Gladys has killed the evening. Break her neck, darling, next time you see her."

Joan, bolt upright on the settee, looked at him absently, not knowing what he had said.

"The money Mother left me!" she exclaimed. "George, I want us to give this house back to Daddy and use my money to buy another — anywhere you like."

That was enough to tell George most of it. But he had to make sure.

"Lyle?" he asked.

"Yes."

"But you said you had no feeling in that direction?" It was a puzzled

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question, without reproach. "Have you — changed back?"

"With a bang!" She smiled, but she was crying, silently. "There was no feeling — until tonight — until you went to that damned telephone and left us alone!"

She was crying quite a lot but still making no sound with it. He could not comfort her until he had shuffled his own thoughts. He grasped immediately that their future hung upon his behavior in the next few minutes.

"Would you care to tell me exactly what happened?"

"I'll try. But there's no *incident*, George! He didn't move from his chair — and I was sitting here all the time. We didn't speak in the beginning. I began to feel he was looking at me and I tried not to look at him. I think we were looking at each other a long time — a very long time. And then he said, 'We've torn it this time, Joan.' It was the way he said it. And then you came in. It certainly wasn't his fault. I suppose it's mine, though I can't quite see how."

George knew her well enough to be confident that she was not fooling herself. There was the bare hope that it might be no more than the welling up of childish memories in a sudden hysteria.

"I don't think —" he was weighing his words — "I don't think it's a good idea to run away."

"George! You don't *want* me to see him again, after what I've told you?"

"If Lyle were to vanish from the earth, I'd be delighted. But he exists. He's not an enemy — he's a problem. It's an illusion to believe that you can run away from him. We might never again see his face — but he'd be living with us all the same."

"*Don't!*" She covered her eyes with her hands. Her distress shook him a little, revealed that there was more danger of losing her than he had thought. But he could not hold her by reminding her of her marriage vows, since she had obviously not forgotten them.

"Assuming that you are right about his feelings and equally right about your own, would you like a divorce?"

"No!" That was very definite. "I would tell you if I did. I just want — oh, to forget that it flared up! You must help me, George — you must!"

"If we run away I can't help you, however hard I try. The dream-lover sheds all human weaknesses. No husband can possibly compete with him."

"Then, must we go on as we are?"

"It's the safest course for all three of us. A commonplace, everyday atmosphere may save us. Take another look at Lyle — in his unromantic moods. Let him take another look at you, ditto."

That did not please her.

"Do you mean that you hope I shall fall *out* of love with him?"

"Or out of love with me. Helping me to be glad to let you go." Before she could object, he went on: "You love him enough to be frightened of your own reactions. And you love me enough to want to preserve our mar-

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riage. That's a deadlock which no single one of us can break."

"So we'll all three break it together — or give it a chance to break itself!" She was adopting the idea all too eagerly. "You're being wonderful about it, George dear!"

Her arms were outstretched. Gently, he held her off.

"I think we must wait," he said, "until we've — all three — made up our minds."

Lyle Brocker was also alarmed. There had been an "interlude" in Amsterdam which had encouraged him to believe he had emotionally forgotten Joan. He had believed it right up to the moment when the disturbance in herself had drawn his eyes to hers and reawakened him.

He would have to clear out and not see Joan again.

But before he could say anything about moving, she announced: "I told George! He thinks we oughtn't to make a crisis of it but carry on as we are and give it a fair chance to blow over."

"Blow over!" Lyle made a noise like laughter. "Or blow up! Let me tell you that you were a fool to throw us away over that girl you called 'redhead.'"

"And a cad for loving George — which I do! He offered a divorce, but I didn't accept. It would be no use, because I would always be remembering how vilely I had treated him. And that would bore you — and I should fall between two cliffs."

"You can't have two cliffs. You oughtn't even to think like that. I wish I could despise you for it — and be free. And then we could be three jolly good friends again."

The attempt to laugh at themselves was a failure, but after a month or so it looked as if the plan as a whole might succeed. Among other devices, the Monday evenings of bridge were started. Gladys Humby, roped in as a permanent fourth, began by misinterpreting Lyle Brocker's courtesy in escorting her home — thereby plunging herself into the emotional whirlpool.

At first, there was some self-consciousness in the three principals, expressed in excessive heartiness. This passed into an intermediate phase in which deep feeling seemed to be suspended. It was an illusion produced by mutual tolerance and good manners — refinements of civilized man to which the nervous system has not yet adjusted itself.

In time, Gladys perceived that being escorted home by Lyle was, in itself, profitless. She would lie awake assuring herself that Joan could not possibly be running Lyle on a string simply to prevent another woman from monopolizing him.

By the turn of the year it was tacitly accepted that the plan had failed. Lyle told Joan that it would be better for him to leave Chermouth as originally intended. Joan said it would be unnecessary since she herself had thought of going to stay with

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a relative in Scotland for six months. When she told George, he said in that case he would look for rooms in London.

But none of them did anything about it, because the vicious circle had already closed.

The tolerance and the good manners, sustained in the presence of others, began slowly to wilt. There were triangular bickerings. The jungle was creeping in on them.

In her diary, Joan recorded her awareness that she was sinking in a quagmire of emotionalism. She realized with self-contempt that she had reached a state in which the power to make a decision had been lost. In this state she no longer felt any love for either George or Lyle, yet lacked the ability to run away from them.

At times, she wished one of them would die — she didn't care which; at other times she wished they would both be killed in a railway accident — anything to break out of the vicious circle.

She did not guess that George might have come to feeling about her as she felt about him — still less that Lyle would go to any length to tear her out of his imagination.

She allowed herself to be amused by Gladys Humby's futile hopes of Lyle Brocker.

"Looks as if we've got something here, sir," said Inspector Rouse. In his open hand was a phial, little more than an inch long. It was empty, but the cork had been replaced. "No prints — they've been wiped off. Found in the shrubbery of the front garden, ten feet from the windows."

The Chief Constable expressed approval, on principle. There could be little hope of tracing the phial itself. Moreover, it might have been flung into the garden of necessity, or placed there by design.

Presently, they went to the kitchen. The three witnesses were waiting "by request" at police headquarters, while the house was searched.

"Nothing in here, sir. The cooker is a super — quart of water boiled in five minutes."

Except for the mess made by the overboiling soup, the kitchen was excellently clean. Under the sink, upturned and glistening, was a garbage pail, beside it a half-burnt match. Maenmore removed the pail and found a second match, also half-burnt.

"Maybe the 'help' smokes," suggested Rouse, "though I can't see a hired woman throwing matches under the sink."

Maenmore looked under the sink at the curving waste pipe.

"Have that swansneck opened, Inspector. And tell your men to find the box of matches that was clipped to the coffee percolator. It's less than half full and the box should bear the marks of the clip."

"Very good, sir," Rouse suppressed a chuckle. This was the armchair touch. Lucky there was no cigarette ashes to analyze.

In the study, next to the morning

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room, the search party had created some confusion, which they would presently clear up. Maenmore was turning away when his eye was caught by a pamphlet which he recognized as the annual Report on the Metropolitan Police, recording the activities of Scotland Yard during the previous year. On the back cover of the pamphlet, which was blank, there was a column of figures in pencil. He contemplated the figures, then pocketed the pamphlet thoughtfully.

Upstairs, there was no difficulty in telling which of the four bedrooms had been Mrs. Esdale's. A strong breeze blew in his face as he opened the door. He looked round, receiving an impression of fastidiousness, though the room was surprisingly untidy. When he observed that the dressing-table had been pulled askew, the untidiness explained itself.

In a few minutes he found Mrs. Esdale's diary, to which he gave profound attention. He learned nothing about the manner of her death, but a great deal about her mentality. Incidentally, he received a picture of Miss Humby's character — with special reference to her emotional cross-currents — which came near to shocking him.

It was close to midnight when Miss Humby and the two men were invited from the waiting room at county headquarters to Chief Constable Maenmore's office.

"Police procedure is designed for dealing with the criminal classes," the Colonel began. "You are not of the criminal classes — but one of you has committed murder. I shall expect the other two to assist me in completing my case against the guilty party."

"I will be only too happy to," murmured Miss Humby. She had tucked her feet under her chair, increasing the effect of dumpiness. At a separate table, Inspector Rouse was occupied with his official bag, which excited her curiosity.

"The poison could have been dropped into the glass before the three glasses were filled, at the sideboard, by the deceased. Each of you, including the deceased, had the opportunity to do so. In the reports which you have given me of your own and each other's movements, one item, however, is unaccounted for — the box of matches that was in the clip on the pedestal of the coffee percolator. Mr. Brocker, you told me you took some matches from the box. Are you quite sure you did not take the box itself?"

"He couldn't have," cut in Miss Humby. "I straightened that box while poor Joan was pouring the drinks. If it really matters what happened to a box of matches, the only person who could have taken it would be you, George, when you went to shut the panel in the window just before you had your drink, if you remember."

"I don't smoke. I never carry matches," said Esdale.

"We have searched the house and the garden for that box of matches,"

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Maenmore went on. "Mr. Esdale, will you please search your pockets?"

Esdale stood up, slapped his side pockets.

"Good heavens!" He laid a partly filled box of matches on the desk. "I'm very sorry, Colonel. I have no recollection whatever of picking it up. And I don't know whether it came from the percolator or not."

"There were no other boxes in your house." Maenmore passed the matchbox to the Inspector. There was a long silence while the latter opened his bag, took out a lens, and examined the matchbox. He pressed carbon paper on the matchbox and measured the result.

"This box," he announced, "has been held in a clip identical with the clip on that percolator."

From his pocket case, the Chief Constable shook out a fragment of stiff paper, folded. It was roughly triangular in shape and barely an inch at its greatest length.

"Will you look at that, Mr. Esdale, and tell me what it is?"

"I don't know what it is, but it looks like the corner of a correspondence envelope."

"It is just that," said Maenmore. "We found it in the waste pipe of the sink in your kitchen, together with some ashes."

"Really?" Esdale was politely curious. "Does that lead to something?"

"You left the room, after gulping your drink, at six minutes past 7." Maenmore glanced at Miss Humby, who murmured agreement. "But you did not go straight to the cooker and heat the soup. If you had done so it would have boiled over long before you left the kitchen — at approximately 7:23. You went to your wife's bedroom. Your purpose was to retrieve a document which you had placed on her dressing table. It was no longer there. After a somewhat frantic search you realized that it might have been blown from the dressing table by the draught from the open window. You moved the dressing table, found the document, then went to the kitchen and burned it over the sink. You then burned the envelope, using a total of two matches, which you threw under the sink. You bungled slightly with the envelope, burned your fingers, and dropped this fragment onto the wet sink. Being wet, it did not burn, so you flushed it down the waste pipe of the sink. You had not quite finished all this when Mr. Brocker shouted. You were close pressed for time, but you remembered to switch on the cooker under the saucepan."

"Amazing!" exclaimed Esdale. "But how does this fantasy link up with the death of my wife?"

"Oh, the link! Yes, of course." Maenmore produced from his breast pocket the annual report on the activities of Scotland Yard. He turned the pamphlet to the blank back cover and pointed to the penciled figures.

"I happen to have studied murder statistics too, Mr. Esdale, so I recognized some of the figures. The first figure is the total number of murders

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committed last year. The next three are deductions of murders believed to have been committed by perverts, maniacs, and professional criminals. The next to the last figure is the number of murders planned by non-criminals. The last figure shows that the chance of the latter escaping conviction is only one in nine-and-a-fraction."

"Quite right," agreed Esdale. "I remember working it out. It's nine to one that the premeditating murderer gets caught. I read a paper on that at the club, last February."

"I can confirm that," said Brocker. "I was his guest at the club."

"Aren't we getting rather lost?" suggested Esdale. "You were going to tell us how all this links up with my wife's death, Colonel?"

"Did you know your wife kept a diary?"

"No! And I'm horrified to hear it. But you know as well as I do that my wife's diary can be evidence only against herself. Not against me."

"True," Maenmore smiled without amusement. "I have no evidence at all, Mr. Esdale, that you murdered your wife — if that was in your mind."

The Inspector shifted in his chair. Brocker emitted a gasping sigh. Miss Humby gaped at George Esdale for enlightenment, but received none.

"Your somewhat odd behavior with the matches, the document, and the soup could have guilty significance only if it were certain that the poison was placed in the glass *before* the glasses were filled by Mrs. Esdale. That was our first assumption — and a very extravagant assumption too! Suicide or murder, there could have been no certainty that the poison would be taken by the person for whom it was intended." He allowed time for his words to sink in before adding:

"Surely it is more reasonable to assume that the poison was added *after* Mrs. Esdale had distributed the glasses!"

"But who could have added it?" said Miss Humby excitedly. "With the three others looking on?"

"The poison was about half a teaspoonful distilled from a large quantity of *KILFLY*," said Maenmore. "It was carried in this phial." He held it up for inspection. "We found the phial in the shrubbery of the *front* garden. Which of you three could have thrown it there unobserved?"

"I *could* have," volunteered Brocker. "I opened the French windows and a minute later I went through them, for Dr. Blagrove. But I didn't."

Maenmore glanced at Esdale, who shook his head.

"I'm out of it. I did go to the windows, to shut them and open the panel. My wife asked me to — while she was mixing the drinks at the sideboard. That would have been too early to throw away the phial. After she turned up with the tray, I didn't go near the windows at the front end of the room."

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"Miss Humby," said the Chief Constable. "After Mr. Brocker had run for the doctor, you were alone with deceased for a short time, were you not?"

"Yes, but I didn't go near the windows — I was beside her until George came in."

It was an unsupported statement. Maenmore opened a folder containing prints of the photographs taken four hours previously, from which he selected one.

"This photograph shows the settee — empty — and the radio with the cocktail glass on it. Will you look at that, Miss Humby?"

Miss Humby took the photograph, breathing heavily over it.

"After the deceased had placed her own glass on the radio, Miss Humby, she crossed the floor to the bookcase and put down the tray with one glass on it for her husband. Where were you in the room when she was at the bookcase?"

"*Me!*" gasped Miss Humby.

"Gladys," cried George Esdale, "I advise you not to answer that question."

"But, George —"

"Shut up! I'm risking suspension by giving you unsolicited legal advice. Take it. Don't answer any more questions."

"I shall not press Miss Humby for an answer," said the Chief Constable. "Mr. Brocker, where was Miss Humby?"

"Oh, damn! Sorry, Gladys, but there's no escape. Miss Humby went to the radio and removed a book which I had put there when I came in, and she handed the book to me."

"So that Miss Humby — *alone* — had an opportunity to add the poison after the glasses had been distributed. I am not asserting that she did so." He looked at Esdale. "But I am asserting that here is a *prima facie* case. And it is my distasteful duty to take appropriate action."

The Chief Constable stood up. The Inspector followed suit.

"I need not detain you gentlemen any longer. Thank you for the help you have given us."

"George, don't leave me!" Miss Humby clutched at Esdale with both hands. "I don't understand. Does the Colonel think I killed poor Joan? Defend me, George — it's what she would have wished."

"All right, I will defend you." Esdale glanced a question at the Chief Constable, who nodded back. "The Colonel was only stating a case. I can easily smash it. But I shall have to say things you won't like to hear, so you'd better sit in the waiting room until we're finished." He gripped her by the elbows and marched her to the door. "Gladys, why couldn't you have left that book on the radio? Because you're the most fidgety, interfering little ass in the world! Remember all your life that I have hated you quite a lot. Now get out."

He shut the door behind her and faced the others.

"You guessed what was in that note, Colonel?"

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"I didn't *guess*," said Maenmore indignantly. "When I knew you had been in a desperate hurry to burn a document which you yourself had placed on your wife's dressing table only twenty minutes before, I knew that document was something the police must not be allowed to see. Which meant that you knew the police would come, very soon — *knew it before there was any sign that anything unusual was about to happen!*" He paused. "That document stated that you had committed suicide and that no one must be blamed, and so on."

"Yes, yes!" Esdale's voice was high-pitched and excited. "And *that* told you the truth about my gulping that drink?"

"When you gulped that drink you knew that there was one chance in three that it would kill you. That is, the odds were two to one against your being poisoned. You preferred that risk" — he tapped the Report on Scotland Yard — "to odds of nine to one against your escaping the hangman."

"But all the risk taken *before* the murder was committed!" cried Esdale. "If the bet came off, I emerged with an absolutely perfect defense. No jury would have believed, after hearing that I gulped down my drink, that I knew there was poison in one of those three glasses before they were handed round."

"If you had been a scoundrel instead of a nervous wreck, Esdale, you'd have got away with it," said Maenmore reflectively. "You wrote that note beforehand because you couldn't stomach the possibility of an innocent person being accused, if it should happen that you received the poison. When you realized that you had not got the glass with the poison, you had to destroy the note before we came. So I knew I had only to produce genuine evidence imperiling one of the innocent persons in order to make you talk."

"Half a minute," said Inspector Rouse. "How could you know it wouldn't kill Mr. Brocker?"

Maenmore answered the question. "He didn't care. The diary shows that those three had got into a tail-spin. Esdale was willing to commit the murder of one — *any one* — to prevent the degeneration of the other two — even if it were himself."

"I had the same idea," said Lyle Brocker. "But I dithered."

"*Cor!*" Twenty years of discipline slipped from Inspector Rouse. "She knew one of you two had killed her. But she blamed herself for the set-up and wanted to save the killer!"

"She couldn't save either of us — and she hasn't!" Lyle Brocker said. "George, your odds-on calculation covered only the police risk. You won — but you threw your winnings away, because you wouldn't allow Gladys to be blamed. I get off scot-free — free to walk past your house and listen for your voice. And listen for her voice — year after year!"

. . . which proves again that murder solves nothing — no matter what the odds.

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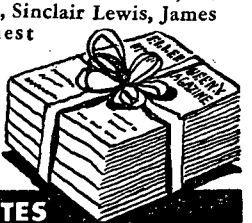

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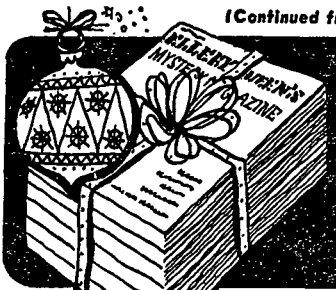

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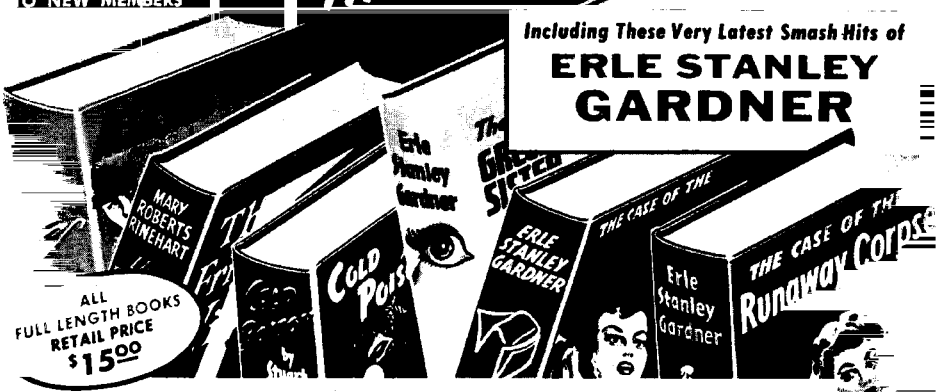

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